

**‘BY THIS GOSPEL YOU ARE SAVED:’
ENCOURAGING PREACHERS TO PROCLAIM
PENAL SUBSTITUTION
AS THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis-project seeks to defend the orthodox evangelical doctrine of penal substitution in the light of recent atonement controversies, and encourage contemporary preachers to guard the Gospel by preaching the cross accurately and regularly. Chapter one sets out the nature of these atonement controversies, and outlines a series of three talks aimed at informing today's preachers of the serious issues at stake and calling them to return to a more cross-centered preaching program. The second chapter sets out the biblical and theological background to the study by considering the meaning of the cross. Drawing from a wide range of evangelical scholarship and key Old and New Testament texts, we consider how the death of Christ appeases God's righteous wrath against human sin, while simultaneously demonstrating his love in offering salvation to fallen men and women.

Chapter three is a focused literature review highlighting key scholarly works, both contemporary and ancient, that deal with the theology of the cross, the nature of contemporary atonement controversies, and an evangelical understanding of penal substitution. The fourth chapter contains the project itself – a series of three talks on penal substitution aimed at preachers – as well as a questionnaire that assesses the effectiveness of the talks. Chapter five analyzes the feedback from the

questionnaire, and gives an overall assessment of the thesis-project, suggesting strongly that today's preachers need to reflect more deeply on the cross as the center of their preaching ministry, and are the ones best placed to recover an evangelical confidence in the doctrine of penal substitution as the heart of the Gospel.

CHAPTER ONE

IDENTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM AND ITS SETTING

A. THE PROBLEM: WHAT IS THE GOSPEL THAT WE PREACH?

It is vital that preachers in every age are clear about the core contents of the Gospel they are preaching. The eternal destinies of men and women hinge on their understanding of Gospel essentials. So how should we respond when Christian leaders are attempting to re-interpret some of the central facts on which the Gospel is built? British evangelicals have had to come to terms with church leaders from a liberal persuasion placing doubts on whether the resurrection of Christ was a real historical event, and whether that matters ultimately to our faith. Such questioning is troubling enough.

But the problem becomes more acute when influential evangelicals, who claim to hold the Scriptures as their ultimate authority, begin to question core elements of the Gospel that have been cherished for centuries. The writer and TV personality Steve Chalke in his book *The Lost Message of Jesus* has rejected the notion that God poured out his wrath on Jesus on the cross,

“The fact is that the cross isn’t a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, people both inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that however, is that such a statement stands in contradiction to the statement “God is love.”¹

His controversial statements have led to rebuttals from the Evangelical Alliance, heated discussions between theologians, and even a public debate at Westminster.

¹ Steve Chalke, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182-83.

This confusion forces an evangelical preacher like myself to scurry back to Scripture for help. What does it mean when we say “Christ died for our sins?” What does the wrath of God have to do with saving faith? What does the term “propitiation” mean? Is God’s wrath incompatible with the statement “God is love?” Does it really matter what I believe about these theological technicalities? Should we not be more concerned about living the Gospel than blowing the dust off ancient creeds?

And how does all this theological reflection relate to authentic Gospel preaching today? What do I need to communicate today so that the deeper message of the cross is clear and graspable for lay people who do not read widely about the atonement? How can I help my congregation navigate their way through the confusion of theological debates, so that they can have conviction about what they believe, and why it matters? These are the questions we will attempt to answer in this project.

The topic of propitiation has been widely discussed among scholars in the twentieth century. It is a complex debate, but today’s evangelical preachers need to be aware of the debate in order both to preach the cross with conviction, and recognize teaching that might lead their congregations astray. The aim of this study is firstly to survey the various atonement theories that the church has wrestled with over the centuries to understand where the reformed notion of penal substitution comes from. Then we want to hone in on the propitiation discussion itself, with the aim of making quite technical Greek language arguments accessible to pastors who may not have training in biblical languages.

What is propitiation? How is the Greek word for propitiation used in the Bible and wider Greek literature? Why is propitiation such a controversial issue today? How have theologians throughout history understood the term? How does what we believe about propitiation affect our understanding of God and the Gospel? What should evangelicals believe about propitiation, and does it really matter?

B. THE PROJECT

Ultimately we want to present a series of three talks to British pastors. These talks will have several objectives. In the first talk, we want to present a challenge to preachers that we are “entrusted with the Gospel” (1 Thess 2:4). That means both preaching a true Gospel ourselves and guarding our congregations from those who twist the Gospel. We then want to assess the current debate about penal substitution – what are Christian leaders in Britain saying about the cross and why should it cause us concern? We will analyse quotes from key books like *The Lost Message of Jesus*, discussing the theological issues it raises, in order to understand exactly what is being said and what its ramifications are for Gospel belief.

In the second talk we will survey various atonement theories throughout church history, and analyze the propitiation debate that began in earnest in the early twentieth century. While we aim to present the views of theologians on both sides of the debate, our ultimate goal is to clear the muddied waters from the minds of evangelical pastors who want to preach sound doctrine.

The third talk will present a coherent theology of propitiation, drawing from key Old and New Testament texts, and analyse why this issue matters so

much for contemporary preaching of the cross. Finally we will suggest principles that can keep our preaching faithful to the Gospel. The third talk will highlight the central importance of preaching the cross, and being clear about what we are preaching. We will discuss the importance of preaching with courage about unpopular issues such as wrath and atonement, and how that affects the view of God our hearers hold. This will lead us to suggest key texts that could form a short series of sermons on the cross.

CHAPTER TWO THEOLOGICAL AND BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

A. *THE LOST MESSAGE OF JESUS AND PENAL SUBSTITUTION*

Steve Chalke's book *The Lost Message of Jesus* has sparked a great deal of debate about Christ's work on the cross. Chalke is a well known TV personality in Britain, a regular keynote speaker at mainstream evangelical events such as Spring Harvest, and is founder of the highly influential organization *Oasis* which has strong links with Youth for Christ, and the Salvation Army.² His book has been warmly welcomed by those who are being dubbed "Emerging Church" leaders including Brian McLaren and Tony Campolo in the States, and N.T. Wright, the prolific evangelical author and high profile Bishop of Durham in England.³

The most controversial element in a book that contains many challenging insights into Jesus' radical mission to the poor and oppressed, lies in Chalke's questioning of orthodox views of penal substitution. Chalke caricatures the reformation view of substitutionary atonement as "a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offense he did not commit." He calls this view "a twisted version of events" which many both inside and outside the church find "morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith."⁴ He sums up the orthodox view by defining it as "cosmic child abuse."

² DA Carson describes Chalke as "an exhilarating speaker, as effective on television as in person" in D.A. Carson, *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 182.

³ From the various endorsements in the book, Wright claims it is "rooted in good scholarship," Campolo that it represents "the holistic theology that the church desperately needs" and McLaren that it introduces a "...Jesus...who can truly save us from our trouble."

⁴ Steve Chalke, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182-183.

Evangelical theologians on both sides of the Atlantic have taken Chalke to task. In the States, D.A. Carson warns, “the cost of Chalke’s thesis is disturbingly high.”⁵ Of particular concern to Carson is not simply Chalke’s views on penal substitution, but his apparently skewed understanding of God’s love that forms the foundation of his controversial statements, “God is now defined in terms of one controlling attribute: his love.”⁶

According to Carson, Chalke’s view of God’s love falls dangerously short of biblical teaching. For Carson the love of God is devalued when it is presented without taking account of the seriousness of man’s sin and the holiness of God that necessitated his wrath being poured out on Christ at the cross. Carson feels that Chalke empties the cross of its power by referring to it merely as,

“a symbol of love. It is a demonstration of just how far God as Father and Jesus as Son are prepared to go to prove that love. The cross is a vivid statement of the powerlessness of love.”⁷

By contrast, Chalke believes that the orthodox view of penal substitution really amounts to “a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards mankind but borne by his Son,” an act of violence which “makes a mockery of Jesus’ own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil for evil.”⁸ Carson finds Chalke’s caricature of penal substitution so dangerous that he calls it “a massive distortion and only a whisker away from blasphemy.” For Carson, God’s righteous wrath at human sin is not a contradiction to his love but rather, “God’s

⁵ *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 183.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁷ *The Lost Message of Jesus*, 183. This passage is quoted by Carson as an example of Chalke’s skewed view.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

love is all the more deeply cherished when the nature of Christ's sin-bearing act on the cross is understood in biblical terms."⁹

He goes as far as to claim that Chalke "has largely abandoned the Gospel."¹⁰ Some evangelical theologians in Britain have been no less scathing in their attacks on Chalke. In a review of *The Lost Message of Jesus* by Andrew Sach and Mike Ovey,¹¹ the writers claim that, "God's white-hot moral purity and indignation at sin have been airbrushed out of the picture."¹²

They complain that Chalke has re-defined holiness as merely "the pain that God feels as he looks at a broken world," and has edited out clear biblical affirmations of his holy hatred of sin. Like Carson, they attack Chalke's limited view of the Fall, especially citing Chalke's use of Genesis 1 where he claims that we have spent too long talking about "original sin" and have missed the fact of man's "original goodness" as God's creation. Sach and Ovey feel that Chalke's emphasis on man's goodness together with his view of divine love that does not take God's wrath into account, is highly dangerous. They feel Chalke ends up with a cross that does not achieve anything, "If God is not angry, and humans are not essentially guilty, then what job remains for the cross?"¹³

What is clear from even this brief outline of the debate on both sides of the Atlantic, is that views on penal substitution open up much wider issues about the nature of God. How are we to understand God's love in conjunction with his

⁹ *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*, 186.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹¹ In *Evangelicals Now* 19, no.6 (June 2004). Sach and Ovey are lecturers at Oak Hill College, a training school for evangelical Anglican ministers.

¹² *Ibid.*, 27.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27.

holiness? Can we speak of God's wrath against human sin, while affirming that "God is love?" These are the kind of issues that biblical preachers are faced with regularly as they try to articulate the Gospel clearly to their hearers. Where we stand on the subject of penal substitution stems from our whole view of God's nature, human sin and Christ's sacrifice. Clearly this is not a debate biblical preachers can easily dismiss as an obscure argument between scholars. At stake is our fundamental understanding of the Gospel.

British preachers must come to terms with this issue against the background of polarized views among evangelical organizations. Chalke is perhaps the most instantly recognizable evangelical preacher in Britain today, and Britain's Evangelical Alliance, the largest body representing British evangelicals, has challenged him to retract his views, and has hosted an historic debate on the issue in Westminster.¹⁴ Furthermore the Keswick Convention and Spring Harvest, two annual preaching conferences in England, attended by thousands representing the broadest spectrum of evangelicals, have responded differently to Chalke, the former withdrawing his book, the latter promoting it and inviting him as their keynote speaker.

Such polarization among publicly well known evangelicals leads to seeds of doubt being sown, not only in the minds of British pastors, but also in congregations where the tendency is to take at face value what trusted leaders say, rather than research doctrinally weighty matters. It is vitally important that British preachers understand the current debate, and the biblical basis for penal

¹⁴ The debate attracted an audience of close to one thousand, and took place on October 7, 2004. Carson calls the EA's response "simultaneously sad, necessary and commendable," *Becoming Conversant*, 187.

substitution, because it will have an impact on the way the Gospel is preached for generations to come. The fact that many of the queries regarding penal substitution are coming from the hugely influential “Emerging Church” movement in Britain and the States, only intensifies the need for preachers to be clear on doctrinal issues that bear heavily on the meaning of the cross itself.

B. A BRIEF HISTORY OF ATONEMENT THEORIES

Before we move towards an assessment of the current debate, it is important to trace the history of theories regarding the atonement. Evangelicals have formed their doctrine of penal substitution, against a background of various atonement theories that the church has wrestled with for centuries.¹⁵

It is widely recognized that the earliest theory of atonement that became established among the Church Fathers is what has been called “The Ransom Theory.” Origen and Gregory of Nyssa were the two principal developers of this theory. The main emphasis behind “The Ransom Theory” is that the atonement represents a victory over the forces of sin and evil. Supporters of this theory point to Jesus’ statement that he came to offer his life as a ransom for many (Matt 20:28; Mk 10:45).

The question then arises, to whom was the ransom paid? It was considered illogical that God would pay a ransom to himself. So it must have been paid to Satan because he held us captive. The ransom payment was the soul of Jesus, but

¹⁵ See the upcoming book by Steve Jeffrey, Mike Ovey and Andrew Sachs, *Pierced for our Transgressions* (Leicester: IVP, 2007), 161-203. A whole chapter quotes liberally from eminent theologians such as Justin Martyr, Gregory of Nazianzus, Athanasius, Gregory the Great and Augustine, who clearly believed in penal substitution in the earliest days of the church.

when Satan had freed the human race following the death of Christ, he realized he could not hold Christ for himself, and the resurrection won a victory for God over the forces of evil.¹⁶ This theory held such sway for the first thousand years of the church that Gustaf Aulen has called it the “classic view.”¹⁷ The notion which was not fully developed by the early church Fathers, that the ransom payment was made towards God, would become an important issue, in the debate about penal substitution.

Two other theories are worth mentioning briefly. “The Socinian Theory” developed in the sixteenth century by Faustus and Laelius Socinus, sees the atonement primarily as an example, “the real value of Jesus’ death lies in the beautiful and perfect example of the type of dedication we are to practice.”¹⁸

This teaching is represented today by the Unitarian church who point to verses like 1 Peter 2:21 which tells us that “Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps.” Another similar theory termed “The Moral Influence Theory” was developed by Peter Abelard. For Abelard the atonement is seen solely as a demonstration of God’s love. Christ did not make some sort of sacrificial payment to satisfy his Father, rather the value of the cross lies in Jesus’ public demonstration of the love of God. In both the “Socinian” and “Moral Influence” theories, “the major effect of Christ’s death was on humans rather than on God.”¹⁹

¹⁶ See a fuller description of “The Ransom Theory” in Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998), 810-813.

¹⁷ Gustaf Aulen, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement* (New York: Macmillan, 1931), 20.

¹⁸ *Christian Theology*, 801.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 803.

It is interesting to note that advocates of the “Moral Influence Theory” see God’s primary attribute as love. Both Abelard and Socinus underplay God’s wrath against human sin, seeing wrath as a contradiction to divine love. This is the essence of Carson’s attack against Chalke. Chalke’s cross is seen through the lens of God’s dominating characteristic which is love. God is more loving than he is holy, or just, or righteous.

Another theory which has attracted attention is Hugo Grotius’ “Governmental Theory.” This is a theory which takes seriously the notion that “some penalty must be paid when God’s laws are broken.”²⁰ The chief emphasis of this theory is that God is the lawgiver and governor of the Universe. While God did not require a payment for sin, the cross was a graphic demonstration that his laws have been broken.²¹

The final theory we will mention here is “The Satisfaction Theory” from which the classical reformed view of atonement has derived. This theory was presented by Anselm (1033-1109), the Archbishop of Canterbury. It is the only theory that “emphasizes that Christ died to satisfy a principle in the very nature of God the Father.”²²

While Millard Erickson states that the “Ransom to Satan” theory was the dominant one among the early Church Fathers, he rejects Gustaf Aulen’s assertion that this is the “classic view.” He is quick to point out that,

“Some of the later Latin theologians had anticipated the satisfaction theory...they recognized a Godward dimension in the atonement.

²⁰ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: IVP, 1994), 582.

²¹ While the “Governmental Theory” takes seriously God’s wrath and justice, we “search in vain...for specific biblical texts setting forth his major points.” *Christian Theology*, 809.

²² *Ibid.*, 813.

Augustine and Gregory the Great had even argued that something in the very nature of God required the atonement, but they did not develop this thought.”²³

Anselm roundly rejected the “Ransom to Satan” theory because it gave too much status to Satan. Humans belong exclusively to God, and even Satan himself is a being created by God who is only allowed to work within the parameters God sets for him, so “there was absolutely no necessity to pay a ransom to the devil.”²⁴

It is God that humans have sinned against. They have not given him the glory he deserves, and must restore to God what they have taken from him. There are only two ways God’s violated honor can be put right: either God punishes humanity directly for their sin, or he can accept satisfaction made on their behalf. Christ, as both God and sinless man, gave his life as an offering on behalf of the human race. He was the only one able to satisfy God, because as fully man he could adequately represent man to God, but as God who did not have to die, his willing death has infinite value, and returns the honor to God that humanity had stolen from him.

It is important to note at this stage that classic evangelicalism embraces, in some way, all of the above theories. Careful readers of Scripture cannot deny that in some sense the cross gave us a perfect example of the type of dedication God desires of us (Socinian), that Christ demonstrated the great extent of God’s love (Moral Influence), and that Christ’s death was a victory over sin, death and hell (Ransom). There is a danger inherent in claiming just one theory of atonement as the one that should pervade. Joel Green’s observation is well taken that,

²³ Ibid., 814. Erickson refers to L.W. Grenstad, *A Short History of the Atonement* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1920), 120-1.

²⁴ Ibid., 814.

“for many (American) Christians penal substitutionary atonement interprets the significance of Jesus’ death fully, completely, without remainder.”²⁵

Green rightly claims that the New Testament offers a great number of images and metaphors for the cross, and preaching that limits itself purely to the “Satisfaction Theory” of atonement, can create a skewed view of discipleship and suffering. For example, if evangelical preachers spent more time proclaiming Christ’s cross as a symbol for our discipleship, as Paul and Peter so clearly do,²⁶ we might have a different view of suffering,

“we tend to see personal suffering or social tragedy as a discredit to our faith, many of us have found the suffering of Christ an embarrassment...those who have continued to locate the cross at the center of Christian faith have often done so by destigmatizing its significance for contemporary discipleship.”²⁷

Green bemoans preachers who *only* preach that Christ has suffered in our place “so that we don’t have to,” a kind of preaching that suits our comfortable, individualistic Western mindset, but is anathema to suffering Eastern disciples who relate powerfully to the cross as a symbol of discipleship, not merely rescue.

Many evangelicals, while agreeing with Green’s broader outlook, would nevertheless claim Anselm’s satisfaction theory as “the most basic,” the one which “makes the others possible.”²⁸ Without some kind of satisfaction theory, the cross cannot save us from sin. The message that dominates biblical revelation is that God’s main problem with human beings is their sin that is an offense to his holy character. Human sin is behind Eden’s expulsion, the whole Old Testament

²⁵ Joel B. Green and Mark D. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2000), 13.

²⁶ See for example Gal 2:20, 1 Pet 2:21.

²⁷ *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, 18.

²⁸ *Christian Theology*, 817.

sacrificial system, God's judgment both of unfaithful Israelites in the Wilderness, and the nations Israel invaded under Joshua, the weakness and division of Israel during the Judges, the cries of a penitent people in the Psalms, the ultimate decline of Israel's monarchy, and the exiles under Babylon and Assyria.

The Old Testament is a story of sin, and Satan only rarely appears as a protagonist. Evangelicals argue that it is Israel's sin, and God's resultant anger issuing from his holiness, that dominate Old Testament revelation, and need to be answered fully and finally at the cross. Other theories of atonement add important insights into discipleship and God sharing in our suffering, but none can deal fully with the enmity between God and man that only the most blinkered reader could fail to see as the driving force behind the plan of salvation.

C. THE HEART OF THE MATTER: PROPITIATION

At the heart of Chalke's problem with the "Satisfaction Theory" of the atonement, is the thought of God pouring out the wrath that was due humanity for their sin, on Christ instead of man, thus appeasing his own righteous anger by the sacrifice of his Son. This is the notion Chalke vehemently rejects as a form of "cosmic child abuse." The idea that Christ appeased God's wrath on the cross is summed up in a word that is used only three times in the New Testament – "propitiation."²⁹ One can speak of "making propitious" or appeasing someone's anger.

²⁹ The word "propitiation" is used in Rom 3:25, 1 Jn 2:2 and 1 Jn 4:10 in the New American Standard Version, the English Standard Version and the New King James Version. The New International Version uses the words "atoning sacrifice" each time (though mentions the turning away of God's wrath in a footnote), while the Revised Standard Version uses "expiation."

It was the sixteenth century reformers, building on Anselm's "Satisfaction Theory," who claimed that the appeasement of the wrath of God was not a dubious, peripheral matter to the cross, but was actually its "central emphasis." As Calvin explains it,

"Christ...received and underwent the penalty in himself which was ready for all sinners, by God's just verdict; he expiated by his blood the misdeeds that rendered sinners hateful to God; by this atonement God the Father was satisfied and *suitably appeased*; by this intercessor *his wrath was placated*; on this foundation the peace of God with men was established."³⁰

In 1931 C.H. Dodd challenged this reformation view of God's wrath being appeased, by presenting a highly influential study on the word group "hilaskomai" from which we draw our term "propitiation."³¹ He claimed that each time a word from the "hilaskomai" word group is used, it does not speak of God's anger being appeased, but simply of sin being dealt with. His study launched a debate that has continued for the rest of the Century.

To summarize a very technical study, Dodd argues that the word translated "propitiation" in many English Bibles should be translated "expiation" ie. that the outcome of Christ's death was purely to cancel sin. By pointing to a series of examples where a word from the "hilaskomai" word group is used, especially in the Old Testament sacrificial system, he sought to prove that God is never the object of the sacrifice offered. God does not need to be, in that sense, satisfied by the sacrifice. He claimed that,

³⁰ G. Baum, E. Cunitz, and E. Ross, eds., *Calvini Opera* (Brunswick and Berlin: Schwetschke, 1863-1900), 2.369. Emphasis mine.

³¹ C.H. Dodd, "Hilasterion, Its Cognates, Derivatives and Synonyms in the Septuagint," *Journal of the Theological Society* 32 (1931), 352-60.

“the notion of propitiation, where the object is not sin but God, is too pagan to be appropriate: there, human beings offer sacrifices to their gods in order to make them ‘propitious’, favorable, and sacrifices are propitiations. But how can one think that the God of the Bible must be made propitious, when he himself is the One who sends forth his Son and publicly displays him as the needed sacrifice.”³²

This is the reason why Dodd prefers to use the word “expiation” rather than “propitiation.” What might seem like an obscure battle between words that the average preacher could do without, is actually crucial. The difference between “expiation” and “propitiation” is a significant one that lies at the heart of the nature of God and the message of the cross.

Dodd explains “expiation” as an impersonal term. He denies the thought that God reveals his retributive wrath against human sin by bringing judgment on sinners, and therefore that his wrath needs to be appeased by sacrifices. The disaster that so often follows the sin of people in the Old Testament is a natural outworking of cause and effect,

“in speaking of wrath and judgment the prophets and psalmists have their minds mainly on events...conceived as the inevitable results of sin...Wrath is the effect of human sin.”³³

In other words, wrath is not a personal reaction of God when he confronts human sin. God has no retributive wrath against human sin that needs to be appeased.³⁴ When the ancients spoke about the wrath of God they were thinking merely of an automatic process that has nothing to do with God’s direct retributive

³² D.A. Carson helpfully summarizes Dodd’s technical study in D.A. Carson, “Atonement in Romans 3:21-26,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, eds. Charles E. Hill and Frank A. James III (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), 130.

³³ C.H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932), 22-3.

³⁴ Stephen Travis is a contemporary theologian who places similar doubt on orthodox evangelical views of God’s retributive wrath. See Stephen H. Travis, “Christ as Bearer of Divine Judgment in Paul’s Thought about the Atonement,” in *Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ. Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology*, eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 332-45.

judgment on sins that anger him. As a consequence, according to Dodd, the word “propitiation” may be erased from our Bibles. God’s wrath does not need to be dealt with on the cross. Christ’s work at Calvary simply cancels or “expiates” sin without any reference to the thorny issue of God’s anger.

In 1965, Leon Morris placed major question marks on Dodd’s study methods,³⁵ claiming that “propitiation” is the universal meaning of the “hilaskomai” word group throughout the abundant examples attested in Greek literature, a point which is accepted by all scholars today. If the original translators of “hilaskomai” did not mean “propitiation” but “expiation,” as Dodd would assert, why choose a word that meant “propitiation” in every other Greek context in its time? Additionally, Morris accused Dodd essentially of not seeing the wood for the trees, by concentrating so heavily on word studies that he neglected the context of God’s wrath that is in the background each time “hilaskomai” words are used, “the averting of anger seems to be a stubborn substratum of meaning from which all the uses can be naturally explained.”³⁶

Morris is left especially incredulous by Dodd’s assertion that there is no such thing as the personal retributive wrath of God in the Old Testament,

“the idea of the wrath of God is so widespread in the Old Testament and so strongly emphasized that one would have thought it would be taken as basic that God is angry when people sin. But no...”³⁷

Morris clearly separates the nature of God’s wrath from his pagan counterparts in Israel’s day. Other deities were capricious. There was no

³⁵ Morris was not the only one to attack Dodd. Roger Nicole made similar arguments. See Roger R. Nicole, “C.H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation,” in *Westminster Theological Journal* 17 (1955), 117-57.

³⁶ L. Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 173.

³⁷ Leon Morris, *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1983), 154.

consistency in what made them angry, and the worshipper was always left guessing what their god was going to do next. By contrast Yahweh's wrath was always consistent with his revealed character,

“The Hebrews were not in doubt. They knew that one thing and one thing alone aroused God's anger, and that was sin. They knew that God was always angry with sin.”³⁸

But for Morris, to deny the reality of God's retributive wrath is to stand against the clear, repeated evidence of Scripture. One of three passages he quotes to make his point is Ezekiel 7:8-9,

“I am about to pour out my wrath on you and spend my anger against you; I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for your detestable practices. I will not look on you with pity or spare you; I will repay you in accordance with your conduct and the detestable practices among you. Then you will know that it is I the Lord who strikes the blow.”³⁹

Morris cannot fathom any interpretation of the Old Testament that denies the reality of God's retributive wrath. Furthermore, he points to the fact that “more than twenty words are used by the Old Testament writers to convey the thought of the wrath of God,” that God's wrath does not “express a minor aberration, found occasionally in obscure passages.” Far from it. In total there are more than “580 occurrences of the words”⁴⁰ for wrath.

In making his argument, Morris points to a possible reason why others have followed Dodd in denying what seems to be plain to any objective reader of the Old Testament,

³⁸ Ibid., 154.

³⁹ Quoted by Morris, *ibid.*, 156. He also quotes from Is. 30:27-30 and Ps. 60:1-3 only as examples, stating that “such passages are frequent,” *ibid.*, 156.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 156.

“The wrath of God is not a highly popular concept and it appeals to us when an outstanding scholar suggests that we may do away with it. We like to feel that we have nothing to fear from God.”⁴¹

Evangelicals unhappy with Chalke’s book might add that it is especially tempting for those wishing to make the Gospel winsome and accessible to our generation, to edit parts of the Gospel we feel uncomfortable with and even embarrassed about as we try to gain a hearing with postmodern listeners. God’s wrath against human sin is not a message that will bring crowds flocking to hear Christian preaching.

Moreover, God in his anger punishing his Son appears at face value deeply distasteful and morally repugnant set against a background of increased child abuse in our culture. Chalke is an evangelist and tireless Christian activist who has worked hard in Britain promoting social projects that bring a practical authenticity to the Gospel he preaches. His opponents however would warn of the dangers inherent in compromising some of the unpopular realities of the Gospel, in order to gain that hearing.

On a similar note, one wonders whether scholars who deny “propitiation” have done so less because of the irrefutable evidence of word studies and more because they feel a God propitiating his own anger is a perverse notion. Certainly that is what Morris’ critique of Dodd seems to infer. When N.H. Young entered the Dodd/Morris debate, he came to the conclusion regarding the translation of “hilaskomai” that,

“if we use ‘expiation’ we must enrich it to include the idea that the cancelling of sin also causes the God-willed effect – which the NT calls “orge” – to cease.”

⁴¹ Ibid., 154.

In other words N.H. Young stops short of affirming God's personal retributive wrath against human sin, by referring instead to a "God-willed effect" which the Old Testament happens to use the word "anger" for, in line with Dodd. But he then goes on to add a caveat,

"The initiative of God in this action must be jealously preserved and all intimations of the *grotesque notion* of God propitiating himself, or his justice, banished. The love of God revealed in the saving event of the cross must dominate in our understanding of "hilaskomai," no matter what English word we choose to baptize into the impossible task of conveying all the concepts attached to this semantically rich word."⁴²

Young rejects the idea that "hilaskomai" includes the notion of God propitiating his own wrath, not because the evidence makes that viewpoint impossible, but because of his preconception that God propitiating himself is a "grotesque" idea. Herein lies the crucial issue. Is the notion of God propitiating himself grotesque, or is it, as reformed theologians universally claim it to be, the glory of the Gospel and the ultimate demonstration of God's love and holiness. Clearly Chalke, by using a term as emotive as "cosmic child abuse" to describe propitiation, would agree with Young's "grotesque" assessment. Have evangelicals since the Reformation accepted a "grotesque" view of the atonement without biblical warrant?

John Stott tackles this question head on by essentially warning us not to judge God's actions by our own notions of justice, but let God dictate what our view of justice ought to be,

"It is perilous to begin with any *a priori*...which then shapes our understanding of the cross. It is wiser and safer to begin with a God-given

⁴² N.H. Young, "C.H.Dodd, *Hilaskesthai* and his Critics," in *The Evangelical Quarterly* 48 (1976), 78.

doctrine of the cross, which then shapes our understanding of moral justice.”⁴³

D. PROPITIATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

What then is the “God-given doctrine of the cross?” It is important at this stage to examine the passages in the New Testament where the word “propitiation” occurs, to see if there is justification for the view that God appeased his own anger at the cross. The first passage is Romans 3:25. D.A.Carson sees Romans 3:25 in the wider context of Romans 1-3, and defends the orthodox view of propitiation in line with Morris.

He is at pains to point out that Paul’s whole argument in the early chapters of Romans concerns the personal, retributive wrath of God being revealed from heaven against all mankind, expressed firstly in God giving people over to the sin they have chosen (Romans 1:18). The context of wrath clearly continues into chapters 2 and 3, as Paul shows how both Jew and Gentile fall under the same condemnation from God, “for those who are self seeking and reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger” (Romans 2:8). Carson concludes,

“the flow of argument that takes us from Romans 1:18-32 to Romans 3:9-20 leaves us no escape: individually and collectively, Jew and Gentile alike, we stand under the just wrath of God, because of our sin.”⁴⁴

The problem that God is addressing at the cross, by presenting his Son as a “hilasterion” (the word translated “propitiation” in Romans 3:25), is the problem of his just wrath against our sin. Daniel Bailey’s research on the word “hilasterion”

⁴³ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester:IVP, 1986), 98. Stott here interacts with both Dodd and A.T.Hanson who confessed to an *a priori* revulsion at the thoughts of God propitiating himself.

⁴⁴ D.A. Carson, “Atonement in Romans 3:21-26,” 120.

concludes that it is best translated “mercy seat,” rather than either “propitiation” or “expiation” as the word “hilasterion” in wider Greek literature always refers to a physical object, never to a concept.⁴⁵ That being said, the translation “mercy seat” does not remove the notion of propitiation. The “mercy seat” was the cover of the Ark of the Covenant in Old Testament times,

“what was under the old covenant bound up with the slaughter of animals...to ‘cover’ sin, is now transcended by a human sacrifice...and placarded by God himself.”⁴⁶

Carson maintains that the Old Testament connects the “covering” of sins with the setting aside of God’s wrath, but beyond simply the Old Testament picture which allows for propitiation, the context of God’s retributive wrath in Romans 1 to 3 demands the notion of propitiation. Furthermore in this passage Paul is clearly wanting to defend God’s justice. How can God, in his righteous indignation, allow the sins of forgiven people to go unpunished when he has promised to “give to each person according to what he has done” (Romans 2:6)?⁴⁷ God cannot simply chose to stop being angry at man’s sin, because his wrath is “nothing other than his holiness when it confronts the rebellion of his creatures.”⁴⁸

Wrath in God is not a haphazard emotion as it often is with humans. God’s wrath is the consistent reaction of God’s holiness when faced with human sin. If God were to stop being angry at sin, he would stop being holy. That is why God’s wrath must be appeased at the cross. He cannot simply overlook sin – his justice

⁴⁵ See Daniel P. Bailey, “Jesus as the Mercy Seat: The Semantics and Theology of Paul’s use of ‘Hilasterion’ in Romans 3:25.” PhD. Dissertation, Cambridge University, 1999.

⁴⁶ D.A. Carson, “Atonement in Romans 3:21-26,” 130.

⁴⁷ This verse in itself contradicts Dodd’s and Travis’ view that there is no such thing as God’s retributive wrath, a key issue in the propitiation debate.

⁴⁸ Carson, 131.

demands that sin must be punished. Nor can he dilute his anger, because it stems from his consistently holy nature. So at the cross the Son is punished in our place, God's righteous wrath is appeased, and God remains "just and the one who justifies" (Romans 3:26). Herein lies the reformed understanding of penal substitution.

Contra Dodd, Young and Travis, God's personal retributive wrath seems to be clearly the context of Romans 3:25, and it is God himself who is presenting his Son to deal "justly" with his own wrath. However morally problematic that may seem, as John Stott asserts, we must start with a clear theology of the cross rather than our own preconceived notions of what morality should look like in God.

It is important to note that the notion of "propitiation" in Romans 3 does not exclude the notion of "expiation." No evangelical scholar would deny that "expiation," the doing away with sin, is included in the rich tapestry which Romans 3:25 presents. They simply assert that the concept of propitiation must also be included in the term "hilasterion." The NIV translates "hilasterion" as "atoning sacrifice" so as to convey both the notion of "expiation" and "propitiation," and adds an alternative translation as a footnote, "*Or as the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin.*"

The other two occurrences of "propitiation" in the New Testament are both found in 1 John. J. Ramsay Michaels' approach to 1 John 2:2⁴⁹ is not only helpful in choosing between "expiation" and "propitiation" as a translation for "hilasmos" in that particular verse, but is pertinent to the whole discussion on propitiation. He

⁴⁹ See J. Ramsey Michaels, "Atonement in John's Gospel and the Epistles," in *The Glory of the Atonement*, 114.

begins by stating, “Propitiation and expiation are both attested meanings of the... ‘hilaskesthai’ word group in both the Greek OT and NT.”⁵⁰

He goes on to make a point that is central to the whole discussion whenever we find the “hilaskesthai” word group either in Old Testament ritual or New Testament cross theology, “literary context takes precedence over linguistic background, never more so that when the latter is inconclusive.”⁵¹

Morris refers to the literary context of wrath that is found repeatedly in the use of “hilaskesthai” in Old Testament ritual, and Carson shows how the same literary context dictates the meaning in Romans 3:25. Ramsey Michaels now shows how the principle makes best sense of 1 John 2:2. The context here is of the believer appealing to Christ as an Advocate whenever we sin against God. As an Advocate, Christ is appealing our case before a holy God, on the basis of his sacrifice for our sins. Thus Michael’s conclusion is difficult to refute,

“The image of Jesus as Advocate with the Father makes God the object, not the subject, of the reconciliation said to be taking place, and to that extent supports propitiation as the meaning of ‘hilasmos.’”⁵²

Michaels’ admits that there is a great mystery attached to such an interpretation, but it is a “mystery at the very heart of the Christian Gospel.”⁵³

Where the context so clearly points to the notion of propitiation, it is much wiser to peer into the mystery rather than reject it as something “grotesque” as Young and

⁵⁰ Ibid., 114.

⁵¹ Ibid., 114.

⁵² Ibid., 114.

⁵³ Ibid., 116.

Chalke have done, “God placates God! The Prosecutor himself sends and appoints the Defense Attorney to plead with the Prosecutor to show mercy.”⁵⁴

The third and final occurrence of “propitiation” in the New Testament is 1 John 4:10, “This is love: not that we loved God but that he first loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice (“hilasmos”) for our sins.” The context this time is none other than the love of God. Here is where Carson is most at odds with Chalke. Chalke sees any notion of propitiation as a complete contradiction to the love of God. But Carson would argue that the love of God is seen at its most glorious when we arrive at a proper, biblical understanding of propitiation. 1 John 4:10 sees propitiation as the very definition of God’s love – “this is love.”

To call what is the very essence of divine love, “cosmic child abuse,” seems to be playing with fire. At the very least, Chalke should have seen that the classic reformation view of propitiation, which many evangelicals cherish today, has clear biblical warrant, even if he disagrees with the reformed interpretation. Nowhere in Chalke’s book does he admit that those who believe in the doctrine of propitiation do so because they are trying to wrestle honestly with challenging Biblical texts. Instead evangelicals who hold to propitiation are dismissed by Chalke as believing in a God who is a child abuser.

However mysterious God placating God may be, evangelicals arrive at this conviction, admitting its mystery, but allowing God to dictate what is ethical and what is grotesque. For Chalke to label so emotively, evangelicals who are merely seeking to understand mysterious biblical revelation concerning the cross, at its most sacred point, is unwise. 1 John 4:10 seems to suggest that God’s love is at its

⁵⁴ Ibid., 116.

most profound when he sends his beloved Son to absorb in his body the just fire of his consistently righteous anger against human sin. Today's evangelicals have every right to declare this position as glorious, and deserve an apology from such an influential preacher who unfairly and unwisely labels such views as "grotesque" or "twisted."

Furthermore, the reformed view of propitiation has wider implications for our understanding of the glory of God. The cross places the glory of God on full display. What Sachs and Ovey called "God's white hot holiness" is seen in the anger he pours out on Christ, the sinner's substitute. God's justice is profoundly seen as God maintains his holiness while forgiving sinners by judging Christ. God's wisdom is seen as he provides a remedy for cosmic decay, while putting on public display the full array of his attributes. And God's love is at its most glorious as he absorbs in his own person the judgment due to sinners so that he might shower them with mercy and propel them to their heavenly inheritance.

So to remove propitiation from the Gospel is at the same time to edit out God's holiness, justice, wisdom and love. Ultimately the glory of God is at stake. To peer into the mystery of propitiation is to begin to understand how God planned the cross to reveal his glory.

E. FURTHER BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR PROPITIATION

There is wider testimony to propitiation in Scripture than merely those times where the word is used in the English Bible. The book of Hebrews is of particular interest here as it delves deeper into the priestly work of Christ that 1 John 2:2 hints at,

“Christ’s priesthood is mentioned explicitly and implicitly in all thirteen chapters.”⁵⁵ Hebrews is a pivotal book for our understanding of the notion of propitiation because it, “repeatedly speaks about God’s wrath against sin.”⁵⁶

This is the concept that Dodd, Young and Travis see as impersonal, and that Chalke seems to dismiss altogether. Once again it is important to notice that in a book which speaks so frequently about the wrath of God, the “hilaskomai” word group appears, even though the word “propitiation” does not appear in the English Bible. Simon Kistemaker points out that Christ is referred to in Hebrews as a “merciful... High Priest... that he might make atonement (“hilaskesthai”) for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:17). The idea of “merciful” is of course not rendering to sinners what they deserve. And crucially, Christ is this merciful High Priest in service to God. It is God to whom Christ offers his blood as a sacrifice. The best explanation of such an image is that Christ is the High Priest who brings mercy from God as he shields God’s people from God’s own wrath. In this context, “A Godward aspect expressed by “hilaskomai” is likely to include propitiation to put it mildly.”⁵⁷

Again Kistemaker points out that claiming propitiation as a meaning of “hilaskesthai” does not mean that “expiation” is not included. Christ’s sacrifice clearly deals with sin. But the very personal nature of Christ’s relationship to God as High Priest, in the context of a book that speaks so often about God’s wrath, points to propitiation as well. Expiation and propitiation are not concepts that we

⁵⁵ Simon J. Kistemaker, “Atonement in Hebrews,” in *The Glory of the Atonement*, 163.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 164. Kistemaker points to Heb 2:2,3; 3:11,18; 4:3,5; 6:8; 8:9; 9:22; 10:27,30-31,39; 12:25,29 as evidence.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 164. Kistemaker here is quoting from Morris.

must place against each other, but they go hand in hand together in all the passages we have examined. Christ's sacrifice deals with sin, and turns God's wrath away at the same time.

The particular image of Christ as High Priest before God, which Hebrews uniquely delves into, also shows us how God's love and wrath are not in conflict with each other. The God who is righteously angry at our sin because of his unchanging holiness, is the same God who lovingly sends his Son as High Priest to both offer a sacrifice to pay for our sin, and plead our case before God's righteous throne. Chalke cannot see any connection between a God of love and a God of wrath, but Scripture does.

A more minor, but still significant pointer towards propitiation is found in Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane, "My father, if it is possible may this cup be taken from me" (Mk 14:35). Jesus is praying to the Father in agony as he contemplates the cross, seeing his forthcoming torment as a "cup" he has to drink. The "cup" is something that the Father has control over, and has given to the Son to drink. Many commentators say the "cup" refers back to Old Testament prophecy, and especially the retributive wrath of God. William Lane says that the cup, "can only designate the chalice of death and of God's wrath that Jesus takes from the Father's hand in fulfilment of his mission."⁵⁸

Sinclair Ferguson points to several Old Testament passages that back up Lane's exegesis. He quotes Isaiah 51:17 which speaks of "the cup of his wrath" and Jeremiah 25:15, 17 which refers to the "cup filled with the wine of my

⁵⁸ William L. Lane, *The Gospel of Mark*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 517.

wrath... So I took the cup from the Lord's hand... to make them a ruin and an object of horror and scorn and cursing." Habakkuk 2:16 shows clearly how the "cup" is a symbol of God's retributive wrath against human sin, "The cup from the Lord's right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover your glory."⁵⁹ It is this "cup" that fills Christ with revulsion, not just because it speaks of untold suffering, but because he knows he will have to endure the full outpouring of his own Father's wrath.

Such an awesome thought fits perfectly with a scene where Christ is so "troubled," that he sweats profusely, while praying with urgency and yet tenderness to his *abba* Father. J.B. Lightfoot speaks of the, "confused, restless, half-distracted state, which is produced by physical derangement, or by mental distress."⁶⁰

Christ is contemplating not only the physical side of the cross, but entering into a position with his Father that he has never experienced before – suffering under his wrath, alienated from that perfect loving fellowship. The profound nature of the Father/Son relationship expressed at Gethsemane, should surely lead us to tread very carefully and consider such emotive terms as "cosmic child abuse" wholly inappropriate at best, blasphemous at worst. Undoubtedly in this holiest of all moments in Christ's life, he is reeling from the thought of what he will have to endure from his Father's hand. Yet he accepts it willingly, refers to his Father tenderly as *abba*, at the zenith of an entire earthly ministry which points to his own death as an act of love that emanates from the Father.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, "Preaching the Atonement," in *The Glory of the Atonement*, 435.

⁶⁰ J.B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan, 1913), 123.

⁶¹ Cf. John 3:16.

We must be careful, however, when we are talking about propitiation in relation to the Father/Son relationship. Christ's role as High Priest as presented in 1 John 2:2 and Hebrews, where he pleads the case of the believer before the throne of God, needs to be seen in the whole context of salvation. As D.A. Carson himself points out, "Father and Son are one in this project of redemption."⁶²

We are not to think that a constantly loving Jesus is trying to placate a constantly wrathful God. Explanations of Christ's role as High Priest must be based around the fact that, in the work of redemption, "God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ" (2 Cor 5:19). It is a loving God who sends his Son as High Priest to offer up a sacrifice that will appease the Father's righteous wrath. The intensity of the Father's love for the world matches that of the Son who gives himself as a sacrifice.

Likewise we must not picture Christ in his mediatorial role as somehow gentler on sin than the Father. The image of Christ forgiving prostitutes, taking children on his knee, and indeed pleading for sinners before the throne, must be balanced with more chilling images of the warrior Christ who carries out God's vengeance on his enemies. Christ shares with the Father the same intensity of wrath against human sin. This is clear in Revelation, a book where it is impossible to avoid the notion of retributive wrath, even with its uniquely symbolic apocalyptic language.

Sinners do not merely hide from the face of him who sits on the throne, but also "from the wrath of the Lamb" (Rev 6:16). Christ the Lamb "treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God" (Rev 19:15). Such an image fits the

⁶² D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 83.

picture of Christ in 2 Thessalonians as he is the protagonist in carrying out God's vengeance against his enemies. It is "the Lord Jesus" who will appear "in blazing fire," Scripture's most potent metaphor for wrath and judgment, to "punish those who do not obey the Gospel...with everlasting destruction" (2 Thess 1:7-8).

So while biblical warrant is strong for the notion of propitiation, preachers need to be careful to give the full redemptive picture or they might end up with a skewed, and confusing picture of the Father/Son relationship. John Stott provides a useful summary,

"We must not then speak of God punishing Jesus or of Jesus persuading God, for to do so is to set them off against each other as if they acted independently of each other or were even in conflict with each other...both God and Christ were...taking the initiative together to save sinners."⁶³

Father and Son are one in the work of redemption. The Father sends his Son, the Son fully aware of the cost involved, willingly obeys the Father. Both Father and Son feel the same wrath against sin, and the same love that leads to the cross.

F. PROPITIATION AND CONTEMPORARY PREACHING

Now that we have examined the biblical evidence for propitiation, and found it to be both plentiful and pivotal to the Gospel, we need to suggest ways that preachers should respond to the confusion that has resulted from Chalke's book in Britain and allied statements from Emerging Church leaders in the U.S.

Evangelical preachers today cannot afford to assume that their congregations are clear about core contents of the Gospel. Theology relating to the

⁶³ John R.W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 140.

cross that preachers might have thought well known and universally accepted, needs to be re-addressed. Not only so, but the issues concerning such doctrines as propitiation are, as can be seen by the history of discussion on the subject, complex. Preaching on the cross cannot be left to brief and occasional evangelistic presentations. How we preach the cross has a powerful bearing on how our congregations understand not only the way of salvation, but the very nature of God.

Sinclair Ferguson laments the lack of emphasis placed on cross theology today even in evangelical circles where it should be our chief focus. He is concerned about the lack of, “output...in terms of books, magazine and journal articles, sermons, seminars and conferences.”⁶⁴

Ferguson claims that the evangelical world has produced a wide range of material on themes linked to creation and eschatology, but he asks pastors the question,

“when did you last go to a conference that had the cross as its theme and focused your attention on the meaning and significance of Christ’s death?...pastor-teachers’ bookshelves groan with works answering the question ‘how can I?’ but are light on works which answer the question ‘How did he?’”⁶⁵

Could it be that evangelical preachers are losing sight of the very centre of their faith? Ferguson does not hold back in his assessment of where things have gone wrong, “There is a scandal in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century pulpit: the veiling of the cross.”

The remedy according to Ferguson, does not need a scholar to spell it out. While he himself is writing an essay at the end of a book on the atonement, he

⁶⁴ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *The Glory of the Atonement*, 427.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 427.

knows that essay writing is not where the tide will be turned, “How essential is it...to encourage preaching that is Christ-centered and cross-centered.”

It should not surprise us that, if popular evangelical preaching has largely stopped addressing the cross, then heresies related to the cross are more likely to creep in. What is more, heresy surrounding the cross is harder for the average church member to detect when people scratch their heads wondering when they last heard a message, let alone a series, that explored the multi-dimensional depths of the cross of Christ. If a firm grasp of the truth is missing, recognition of error is harder to spot.

This is a very serious issue for preachers to address today, not least when one understands the responsibility that preachers uniquely have before God to uphold truth and combat error, most especially when that error concerns the cross. Not all heresy is equally damaging because not all truth is equally important. The closer we get to the central tenets of the Gospel, the higher the stakes become for those who purport to be Christian preachers.

Craig Blomberg in his article intriguingly titled “The New Testament Definition of Heresy (Or When do Jesus and the Apostles Really Get Mad)”⁶⁶ identifies the false teaching that most disturbed the early church. For example, he describes Galatians as “this fiery letter” which “presents perhaps Paul’s harshest moments.” The reason Paul is so harsh is because Christian leaders, “who have every reason to know better” were presenting a “different Gospel – which is really no Gospel at all (Gal 1:6).” Blomberg concludes: “Paul never vilifies his opponents

⁶⁶ *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:1 (March 2002), 65-72.

with such harsh language except where peoples' eternal destinies hang in the balance."⁶⁷

When false teachers in 2 Corinthians 10-13 are presenting a similar threat to a proper understanding of the Gospel, "not surprisingly, Paul's language rivals that of Galatians in severity."⁶⁸ These Judaizers, who called themselves apostles, were scathing of Paul, and were preaching a skewed Gospel that Paul attributes to a "different spirit" (2 Cor 11:4). He goes as far as to call them servants of Satan who "masquerade as servants of righteousness" (2 Cor 11:15).⁶⁹ What a warning that is to today's preachers who are being tempted to sideline the cross in their preaching, or are being deceived to preach a cross that differs significantly from biblical revelation.

By comparison Paul's correction of less crucial eschatological misunderstandings among the Thessalonians is "entirely in the spirit of encouragement and edification."⁷⁰ Our understanding of eschatology is clearly not a core belief on which peoples' eternal destinies hang. The intensity of Paul's reaction to error seems dependent on how close that error falls to central Gospel truth. He corrects peripheral misunderstandings with gentleness, but the fundamentals of the Gospel are to be guarded at all costs. Blomberg concludes with the surprising observation that the New Testament apostles reserve their

⁶⁷ Ibid., 66.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 68.

⁶⁹ Added to their distorted gospel is a boast in their rhetorical credentials which Paul finds unworthy of a Gospel minister.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 67.

harshest criticisms, not for proponents of other religions, but for Christian preachers who are distorting the truth.⁷¹

When it comes to the issue of propitiation, and its implications for our understanding of the character of God, surely we are dealing with the very heart of the Gospel, or what Carson calls “the glory of the cross.”⁷² Whether or not God’s wrath was being appeased at the cross as a solution to human sin, is of utmost importance. It is more important than our views on such issues as eschatology or charismatic gifts, or our theology of creation. Christ’s death under God’s righteous wrath is the very heartbeat of the plan of salvation.

Evangelical preachers, then, have a hierarchy of priorities. And the top rung of the ladder is their preaching of the cross. A preacher needs to devote himself to understanding the cross in all its richness so that he can preach it frequently and accurately. This point is all the more evident when Paul summarizes the core content of the Gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1-3. This passage presents us with a biblical framework that underlines how important the accurate transmission of core Gospel truth is for preachers today.

It represents one of a number of responses Paul makes to concerns that the Corinthian church had raised. But it is clear that the Gospel issues of chapter 15 represent more fundamentally important truth in Paul’s mind than those previously discussed.⁷³ In fact many commentators argue that,

⁷¹ Blomberg particularly points to “the ultraconservative religious insider who transgresses key boundaries” and his point that “Christians have often vilified one another on...doctrinally minor issues,” *ibid.*, 67, is well taken.

⁷² D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 83.

⁷³ For example divisions in the church (ch.1), sexual immorality (ch.5), meat sacrificed to idols (ch.8), spiritual gifts (ch.12). These are clearly important issues, but not as important as 1 Cor 15 that forms a kind of crescendo to the letter.

“1 Corinthians 15 provides the most appropriate vantage-point from which to understand the argument and theology of the first fourteen chapters of the epistle.”⁷⁴

Roy Harrisville suggests that 1 Corinthians 15 “is the heart or hub of the letter from which everything has radiated.”⁷⁵ The issue Paul is responding to is the claim by some in Corinth that “the dead are not raised” (1 Corinthians 15:16). At stake is a central issue in the Gospel, magnified by Paul’s bold claim that “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (v.17).

But Paul cannot defend the resurrection of Christ without firstly re-emphasizing the importance of Christ’s death “for our sins” (1 Cor 15:3). The centrality of the cross to the Gospel message is highlighted by the fact that Paul goes out of his way to re-enforce its importance in the middle of such a crucial debate about the resurrection,

“What his Corinthian opponents or his interpreters have put asunder, for Paul was not only joined together but one and indivisible...The proclamation of the resurrection is at the same time and in the same breath the word of the cross; the word of the cross is at the same time and in the same breath the proclamation of the resurrection.”⁷⁶

The cross and the resurrection are unified strands of the eternal Gospel. When Paul is talking about the cross and the resurrection, he is on the same level of crucial Gospel truth as when he is so fierce with the Galatian false teachers and the “super apostles” of 2 Corinthians. Indeed the phrase that opens 1 Corinthians 15,

⁷⁴ Anthony C. Tjhielston, “Luther and Barth on 1 Corinthians 15: Six Theses for Theology in Relation to Recent Interpretation,” in *The Bible, the Reformation and the Church: Essays in Honor of James Atkinson*, W.P. Stephens, ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 256-89.

⁷⁵ *1 Corinthians*, Augsburg Commentary on the New Testament (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1987), 247. Calvin’s commentary referred to chapter 15 as the crown of the epistle.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 248.

“the Gospel I preached to you” (1 Cor 15:1) is the exact phrase Paul uses to introduce his fiery rebuttal of the Galatians (Gal 1:11).

When Paul tells the Corinthians that he wants to “remind” them of the Gospel he preached to them he is using “a nice piece of irony.”⁷⁷ They should already know the Gospel from Paul’s previous visits, as the work of Christ on the cross dominated his preaching, “I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:2). Gordon Fee’s comment on this verse illustrates that nothing mattered in Paul’s ministry as much as his preaching of the cross, “he had the gospel, with its crucified Messiah, as his singular focus and passion when he was among them.”⁷⁸

If Sinclair Ferguson’s observations are right that the cross has been pushed to the periphery of evangelical preaching, what a reproof this is to contemporary preachers. The “crucified Messiah,” and all that his death represents for humanity, consumed Paul’s preaching and even his demeanour⁷⁹ because peoples’ eternal destinies hung on their accurate grasp of the “word of the cross.” This was the Gospel the Corinthians had “received, on which you have taken your stand” and Paul was quite clear “By this Gospel you are saved” (1 Corinthians 15:1-2). The stakes could not be higher because “their past (‘you received’), present (‘you stand’), and future (‘you are being saved’)⁸⁰ rested on an accurate understanding of its content.

⁷⁷ Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 719.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷⁹ Paul says “I came to you in weakness” (1 Cor 15:3) as though his being reflected Christ on the cross, in contrast to his more flamboyant opponents; an important theme in the letter.

⁸⁰ Fee, 720.

The crucial nature of preaching the cross is further emphasized by the warning Paul attaches. If the Corinthians have not grasped the word of the cross, they “have believed in vain” (1 Cor 15:2). It would be difficult to think of a warning with more serious implications. A skewed understanding of the cross and Christ’s resurrection threatens the very foundation of saving faith. If a Christian preacher were looking for some motivation to be accurate and certain about his understanding of the cross and terms like propitiation, then he finds it here in bold letters.

So what is this “word of the cross” which, alongside the resurrection, forms the hinge upon which our eternity swings? What is the content that Christian preachers need as their “focus and passion” if they are to preach a Gospel that saves? Paul’s whole approach to the creedal formula he gives the Corinthians in verses 3 and 4, demonstrates that this is truth that cannot be distorted. This is the ‘bullseye’ of Christian doctrine. The severest judgment would fall on any who twist this sacred statement.⁸¹

Though Paul is clearly confident in his own authority as an apostle,⁸² he does not use his own words to define the content of the Gospel. Paul has “received” this Gospel and has simply “passed it on” (1 Cor 15:3) to the Corinthians, “this is technical vocabulary from Paul’s Jewish heritage for the transmission of religious instruction.”⁸³

⁸¹ See alongside his Corinthian threats, Paul’s stern warning in Gal 1:8 “...even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!”

⁸² Paul is not usually shy in asserting his apostolic authority as a conveyer of truth. In the previous chapter concerning spiritual gifts he boldly states “what I am writing to you is the Lord’s command” (1 Cor 14:37) without any need for further affirmation from other apostles.

⁸³ Ibid., 721.

Paul treats the tradition of the Lord's Supper, a celebration intimately bound up with the message of the cross, with similar care, "I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you" (1 Cor 11:23). He is like a courier with an important package to deliver, a package he must not tamper with. In chapter four Paul has already highlighted his sacred stewardship of "the secret things of God." He has been "given a trust" in communicating the Gospel and knows that "it is the Lord who judges me" (1 Cor 4:1-2, 4).⁸⁴ By using a creedal formula that was framed by other apostles before Paul's preaching began, and forms the core of the church's belief, he further underscores how carefully Christian preachers should treat it. Each statement of the creed begins with the conjunction "that" to emphasize that Paul was quoting from a recognized creed rather than creating his own.⁸⁵

The formula itself is the essence of simplicity, "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3). However these five sacred words summarize a complex strand of interconnected truth drawn from Old Testament allusions, and New Testament teaching from Jesus and the apostles, that point towards the notion of penal substitution and propitiation. The phrase "for our sins"⁸⁶ warrants our particular attention. The little preposition "for," *hyper* in the Greek,

"seems to have arisen from the image of one person standing or bending over another in order to protect or shield him...*hyper*...could simultaneously express representation and substitution."⁸⁷

⁸⁴ 1 Corinthians 4 is a key passage that all Christian preachers should use to test their true motives in preaching the Gospel.

⁸⁵ See J. Murphy-O'Connor, "Tradition and Redaction in 1 Cor 15:3-7." *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, no.43, (1981), 583.

⁸⁶ The phrase occurs in Rom 5:8; 14:15; 1 Cor 11:24; Gal 2:20; 1 Thess 5:10; Jn 10:11,15; 11:50-51; 15:13; 18:14; 1 Jn 3:16; Heb 2:9; 9:24; 10:12.

⁸⁷ Murray J.Harris, "Hyper," in *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Colin Brown ed. (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1986), 1196-1197.

As soon as we start asking the question “from what is Christ shielding us,” we find ourselves staring once more into the mystery of propitiation. Propitiation and penal substitution is at the heart of the theology of the cross. It is part of the ‘bullseye’ of Christian doctrine that preachers must guard and love and preach frequently. The eternal destinies of men and women depend on that preaching and, as we have seen, the glory of God radiates from an accurate presentation of the cross. The stakes could not be higher.

CHAPTER THREE FOCUSED LITERATURE REVIEW

A. *THE LOST MESSAGE OF JESUS AND THE EMERGING CHURCH*

Chalke, Steve. *The Lost Message of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.

Chalke's controversial book is still among the 'top ten' bestsellers in Christian bookshops in the UK, three years after its publication. His statements about penal substitution occur in the last chapter of the book. The book concentrates on the message of Jesus that Chalke claims we have lost – the inbreaking of God's Kingdom and the "shalom" that Jesus now offers to all. God's love dominates the book's theology as Chalke emphasizes Jesus' mission to the marginalized and the poor, and calls the church to love as he loves. Chalke sees the penal substitution view as a contradiction to the love ethic that dominated Jesus' life and teaching. He claims that he used to preach a penal substitution view, but has now seen the error of his ways. His emotive reference to propitiation as "cosmic child abuse" continues to cause a stir.

Carson, D.A., *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.

Carson's book is the best scholarly appraisal available to date of the Emerging Church movement. While he has much positive comment to make on the movement, he is especially scathing not only of Steve Chalke's book *The Lost Message of Jesus* but also of Brian McLaren's book *The Secret Message of Jesus*.

In a sobering section critiquing those books Carson holds that, in their rhetoric at least, Chalke and McLaren have abandoned the Gospel. He is also scathing of the dismissive way Chalke describes the Old Testament sacrificial system in the temple, arguing that the temple was God's own design to teach us about his holiness and our sin. Carson's balanced and scholarly critique is essential reading for those who wish to understand the theology behind the influential Emerging Church movement.

Ovey, Mike and Sachs, Andrew, A Review of *The Lost Message of Jesus*. In *Evangelicals Now* 19/6 (June 2004).

Sachs and Ovey come from a strongly reformed camp in the UK. They launch a similar, but even more damning attack than Carson on Chalke's book, claiming that Chalke's view of the Fall and sin in general is highly skewed. They are especially harsh on Chalke's "exemplarist" view of the atonement, claiming that Chalke's cross has no power to save. They point to the dangers of reading the book, especially for young Christians who might be drawn to the attractive way Chalke writes. While Sachs and Ovey's language is at times overly harsh, it is difficult for evangelicals who wish to remain faithful to Scripture's teaching on the nature of sin and God's remedy, to refute the case they present.

McKnight, Scot. "Atonement an Emerging Issue 3." (March 17, 2006). *Online*. Available from <<http://www.jesuscreed.org/?cat=8>>.

McKnight is an American evangelical scholar who has thought deeply about the Chalke/Carson controversy. On his website which discusses many contemporary issues facing evangelicals, he gives his own balanced critique of Chalke's book, interacts with Carson's response (he is a former colleague of Carson at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School), and gives his own assessment of wider atonement theories. McKnight's website is packed with useful information about views on the atonement from a scholar who has read widely, including the origin of the notion of "cosmic child abuse" in feminist circles. Critics would say that he does not take seriously enough the damage Chalke's atonement views can do to evangelicalism today, but he does highlight the complexities behind penal substitution, and underlines how easy it is for well meaning preachers to present a warped view of God. He particularly commends Stott's *The Cross of Christ* as the book which best presents an accurate and winsome view of propitiation.

B. ATONEMENT THEORIES THROUGHOUT CHURCH HISTORY

Erickson, Millard J. *Christian Theology*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1998.

Erickson's masterful evangelical work is useful for gaining an overview of the various atonement theories throughout history. Of particular interest is his refutation of Gustaf Aulen that the early "Ransom Theory," which held sway for the first thousand years, is the classic theory of the church. Erickson points to other

useful works in his footnotes that show how early church theologians saw a Godward focus in the atonement prior to Anselm's "Satisfaction Theory," without fully developing their thought. (Shaw and Edwards' book below carry this idea further). He suggests ultimately that while evangelicals embrace all the atonement theories in some form, the "Satisfaction Theory" is primary for our understanding of salvation.

Aulen, Gustaf. *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*. New York: Macmillan, 1931.

The Swedish theologian Gustaf Aulen outlines three types of atonement theory which he claims have dominated church history, including Anselm's "Satisfaction Theory" which he calls the Latin view. Aulen ends up proposing Christ's victory over evil – "Christus Victor" - as the "classical view". He claims that the mediaeval world unfairly rejected the "classical view" because their historical time frame could not cope with the dualism of Christ's victory over sin and Satan. Critics would say that Aulen's arguments are more historical than Scriptural, that he does not pay enough attention to numerous Scriptures that point to sacrifice and substitution, that he barely uses the Old Testament in his work, and that he unfairly claims that Luther proposed a "Christus Victor" viewpoint as primary when substitutionary atonement was clearly Luther's primary view. Nevertheless Aulen's work is profound and has many helpful insights for evangelicals who see penal substitution as the "classic view" but also regard "Christus Victor" as having clear, though not competing Scriptural warrant.

Green, Joel B. and Baker, Mark D., *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross: Atonement in New Testament and Contemporary Contexts*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2000.

Green and Baker's innovative book aims to uncover how different cultures relate to the various metaphors Scripture gives us for the atonement. They feel the classic evangelical view of penal substitution has been given too much prominence and creates unnecessary difficulties in relating the Gospel to a post modern audience. For example, other cultures like the Japanese relate more to the shame of the cross, as shame is a more significant issue to them than the courtroom setting of penal substitution. Green and Baker want us to embrace the full range of biblical metaphors that are offered for the cross, including reconciliation, redemption, sacrifice and battleground. Their book is a helpful challenge to evangelicals not to be so devoted to penal substitution that the truths behind other clearly biblical metaphors are discarded. It also gives a useful picture of the background against which each atonement theory was formed. However critics would say that they are playing with fire by minimizing the centrality of penal substitution because it does not go down well in our politically correct culture. They would also claim that clear substitutionary imagery from Scripture is overlooked in the book, and that Green and Baker's assessment of the development of penal substitution as a theory is very limited as they relate it most directly to Charles Hodge, when the reformers, not to mention earlier theologians, had developed it powerfully.

C. C.H. DODD AND THE TWENTIETH CENTURY PROPITIATION DEBATE

Dodd, C.H., “Hilaskesthai, Its Cognates, Derivatives and Synonyms in the Septuagint.” *Journal of the Theological Society* 32 (1931), 352-60.

Dodd’s famous article in 1931 was the spark that lit the propitiation debate in the last century. He argued that wrath in the Old Testament is impersonal – that God is rarely seen as its subject. What Old Testament writers expressed as God’s wrath is simply the inevitable damage that sin causes. He claimed that the “*hilaskomai*” word group as a consequence, refers only to “expiation,” the doing away with sin, rather than “propitiation,” the appeasing of God’s wrath. Propitiation was a distinctly pagan notion that was foreign to the thought of both Old and New Testament writers. Any who deal with the propitiation issue today must interact with this seminal article which has been so firmly attacked by orthodox evangelicals, especially Leon Morris and Roger Nicole. Dodd’s influential article has caused several modern translators to remove “propitiation” from the Bible in favour of “expiation.”

Nicole, Roger R., “C.H. Dodd and the Doctrine of Propitiation”. In *Westminster Theological Journal* 17 (1955), 117-57.

Roger Nicole was the first evangelical scholar to attack C.H. Dodd’s view on propitiation. This article presents twenty-one reasons to reject Dodd’s thesis. Nicole argues among other things that the Old Testament word for atonement, “kipper,” carries the clear notion of propitiation where the sacrificial system is the context. In addition the LXX translators of the Old Testament would not have used

the word group “hilaskomai,” if they did not mean propitiation, as that was the universal meaning of the word in wider Greek literature of the day. While defending the orthodox notion of propitiation, Nicole also argues that evangelicals must carefully guard the mercy and grace of God, not allowing their presentation of propitiation to picture God as a vindictive being thirsting for man’s blood.

Morris, Leon, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965.

Morris’ classic work is perhaps the most rewarding read of this whole bibliography for the orthodox evangelical. Morris, with the depth of a scholar, but the clarity of a teacher, explains key atonement words such as “covenant,” “reconcile” and “justify,” while devoting two chapters to the theme of “propitiation.” At the heart of Morris’ propitiation presentation is his refutation of C.H. Dodd who claimed that the “hilaskomai” word group only meant “expiation” rather than including the notion of “propitiation.” Morris is adamant that the idea of wrath is behind every use of “hilaskomai,” and points to wider evidence of God’s retributive wrath pervading the Old Testament, and appeased at the cross. He also defined God’s wrath helpfully for evangelicals, referring to it less as a spontaneous rage that humans are partial to and more as the consistent response of a character who loves good and hates evil.

_____ *The Atonement: Its Meaning and Significance*. Downers Grove: IVP, 1983.

This shorter work is the popular version of Morris’ *Apostolic Preaching* above and is much more readable for the average layman or pastor. It avoids some of the

original language technicalities, while still dealing thoroughly with the propitiation debate.

Young, N.H., “C.H.Dodd, ‘Hilaskesthai’ and his Critics”. In *The Evangelical Quarterly* 48 (1976).

Young’s article joined in the Dodd/Morris debate. While Young accepts some of the points Morris makes in his critique of Dodd, he stops short of affirming retributive wrath as a biblical concept, and refers to the orthodox notion of propitiation as “grotesque.” The article is not easy reading, delves into a quite technical linguistic debate, but is nevertheless useful for understanding the *a priori* struggles many scholars have with the notion of propitiation, and the lengths they will go to in order to depersonalize God’s wrath. Young concludes that God’s love must dominate our understanding of the complex “hilaskomai” word group.

Bailey, Daniel P., “Jesus as the Mercy Seat: The Semantics and Theology of Paul’s use of ‘Hilasterion’ in Romans 3:25”. PhD. Dissertation, Cambridge University, 1999.

Bailey’s PhD. dissertation is technical and detailed, spending a great deal of time tracing the meaning of the word “hilasterion” in the wider Greek literature of New Testament times. His thesis concludes that the term as used in Romans 3:25 cannot refer to a concept but rather to a physical object. His solid research would lead him to translate “hilasterion” as “mercy seat” referring to the lid of the Old Testament Ark of the Covenant. This does not remove the notion of propitiation in Romans 3:25, as Bailey himself would affirm, because the symbolism behind the mercy seat points to the appeasement of God’s wrath in Christ’s sacrifice. However it creates

problems for translators who wish to use the word “propitiation” in Romans 3:25 when “mercy seat” would be a more accurate rendering.

Travis, Stephen H., “Christ as Bearer of Divine Judgment in Paul’s Thought about the Atonement”. In *“Jesus of Nazareth: Lord and Christ. Essays on the Historical Jesus and New Testament Christology”*, eds. Joel B. Green and Max Turner. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994.

Travis, a lecturer in the London School of Theology, is in many ways a disciple of C.H. Dodd. He claims with Dodd that divine wrath must be seen in a non retributive sense, that Christ’s death simply absorbs or neutralizes sin. He takes Pauline texts such as Galatians 3:13, 2 Corinthians 5:21 and Romans 3:24-26, central in the propitiation debate, and makes a case that there are other possible interpretations for these verses outside a retributive framework. His essay is important for our understanding of how professing evangelical theologians, who see Scripture as authoritative, arrive at the view that God’s wrath is impersonal. His findings lead him to reject the orthodox notion of propitiation, preferring the term “expiation.”

D. CONTEMPORARY EVANGELICAL VIEWS ON THE ATONEMENT

Jeffrey, Steve, Ovey, Mike and Sachs, Andrew, *Pierced for our Transgressions*. Leicester: IVP, 2007.

This book, due to be published in 2007, promises to be the most up-to-date, thorough defense of penal substitution available. It is written from a reformed evangelical perspective by scholars from Oak Hill Theological College in London. The book begins with solid exegesis of the main biblical texts from which the

doctrine is drawn, from the passover lamb of Exodus 12 to the “scapegoat” of the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, to the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, from several passages in Romans, to the “curse” theology of Galatians 3:13, and Christ bearing our sins in 1 Peter 2 and 3. This thorough exegetical defense is followed by a chapter showing how penal substitution is an essential component of wider biblical theology, such as the nature of the Trinity and the justice of God. A significant section is devoted to the historical credibility of penal substitution, examining the writings of noted theologians from Justin Martyr and Athanasius to John Calvin and John Stott, who all clearly believed the doctrine was at the heart of the Gospel. Several chapters are then usefully devoted to answering the myriad of objections raised against penal substitution, from its supposed advocacy of violence, to its alleged contradiction of the love and justice of God. The book interacts with all the key scholarship, from C.H. Dodd to Joel Green, has a very detailed bibliography tracing the history of the debate, and looks set to be a standard work for any future evaluation of the doctrine.

Hill, Charles E. and James III, Frank A., eds., *The Glory of the Atonement*. Downers Grove: IVP, 2004.

This up-to-date collection of essays is a treasure trove of contemporary reformed thinking covering all matters relating to the atonement, by some of the leading evangelical scholars of our day. The collection is in honor of Roger Nicole and is core reading for any evangelical assessment of the propitiation argument. The book is divided into three parts beginning with exegesis on key Bible passages relating to the atonement, followed by an analysis of the history of atonement theology and its

key thinkers, and ending with practical essays on the atonement in connection with Christian living and preaching. The following essays from the collection are of particular interest:

_____ Carson, D.A., “Atonement in Romans 3:21-26.”

Carson’s essay highlights that the context of Romans 3:25 where “hilasterion” is used, is clearly the retributive wrath of God, showing wrath as the theme which dominates from Romans 1:18 to Romans 3:20. He argues that God presents Jesus as the ultimate ‘mercy seat’ (his translation of “hilasterion”), a clear reference back to the Old Testament sacrificial system, and that the Old Testament clearly connects the “covering” of sins with the appeasement of God’s wrath. He then shows how evangelicals can reconcile a God of wrath with a God of love. He attacks N.T. Wright’s “new perspective” on penal substitution, by arguing that God must act to appease his own wrath because he is both the Judge and the offended party in human sin. Carson’s essay is particularly adept at showing the flaws in the complex arguments of C.H. Dodd, Stephen Travis and N.T. Wright.

_____ Michaels, J. Ramsey, “Atonement in John’s Gospel and the Epistles.”

Michaels’ exegesis of the use of *hilasmos* in 1 John is again essential reading. He claims along with Carson and Morris and contra Dodd that both “expiation” and “propitiation” are reasonable translations for the “hilaskomai” word group. In each case the context must dictate, and the context of Christ being the believer’s high priest representing them before a holy God in 1 John 2, clearly points to

“propitiation.” The same principle leads to the notion of propitiation in Romans 3:21-26.

_____Ferguson, Sinclair B., “Preaching the Atonement.”

Ferguson’s practical essay on preaching the atonement is insightful. While defending the orthodox view of propitiation, Ferguson gives a clarion call to evangelical preachers to return to preaching the cross. He claims that too many secondary issues are dominating popular evangelical thinking today, and that like Paul we should regard the preaching of the cross as our priority and passion. He then offers practical pointers as to how to preach the atonement, emphasizing its multifaceted beauty and application not just for our understanding of salvation but for Christian discipleship and indeed the preacher’s own demeanor. Preachers must preach the cross while carrying the cross.

Stott, John R.W. *The Cross of Christ*. Leicester: IVP, 1986.

John Stott’s magisterial work on the cross is important, not simply for its learned defense of penal substitution, but for its winsome exposition of propitiation. Stott along with other reformed scholars, believes that over zealous evangelists have explained propitiation in a way that sees Christ as convincing God to forgive us, rather than the Father and Son being in unison in the plan of salvation. Stott’s description of the equally loving design of Father and Son within a propitiatory framework, is very helpful for the contemporary preacher who wants to give a balanced presentation of such a controversial theme.

Carson, D.A. *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*. Leicester: IVP, 2000.

Carson's short, popular level book aims to deal with difficulties we face understanding God's love in conjunction with his sovereignty, his holiness and his wrath. The book analyses Biblical teaching on the various aspects of God's love, including his love for the unbelieving world, and his elective love for the church. It closes with a chapter on God's love in conjunction with his wrath, which, like Stott before him, keeps the integrity of biblical passages which point clearly to the Son enduring the Father's wrath on the cross, while showing how Father and Son were working in loving partnership for the salvation of sinful men. For all its popular appeal, the work is still scholarly and biblically balanced, and helps evangelical preachers present propitiation in a winsome way.

Shaw, Ian J. and Edwards, Brian H. *The Divine Substitute. The Atonement in the Bible and History*. Leominster: Day One Publications, 2006.

Shaw and Edwards' study of penal substitution is the most recent orthodox evangelical work on the subject in a British context. Shaw is a lecturer in church history and Edwards a pastor and they have combined their specialist fields to produce a book that traces the biblical theology of substitution, God's wrath, human sin and propitiation, as well as the history of Christian thought on the atonement. They argue that even the early church fathers such as Origen, who is credited with the "Ransom Theory," spoke in clear terms about propitiation and penal substitution in his commentaries. Every major epoch of church history contains significant theologians who argued for penal substitution and propitiation long

before the reformers, and the biblical record of both Old and New Testaments point categorically towards penal substitution as the centrepiece of redemption. The study interacts with all the key scholarship on the issue, including Dodd and today's Emerging Church views represented by Chalke and Brian McLaren, and presents the most up-to-date and coherent defense of propitiation as lying at the heart of the Christian gospel.

E. THE IMPORTANCE OF AN ACCURATE THEOLOGY OF THE CROSS

Blomberg, Craig. "The New Testament Definition of Heresy (Or When do Jesus and the Apostles Really Get Mad)." In *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 4011 (March 2002), 65-72.

Blomberg's article is important to this project as it highlights the crucial nature of accurate cross theology. The brief article examines how Jesus and the apostles in the New Testament responded to false doctrine in the church. Blomberg finds that the closer false doctrine comes to the meaning of the cross and salvation, the more vehement the apostles become in their condemnation of the teachers. They are more ruthless with professing Christian teachers who err than with teachers from other faiths and ideologies, and they warn churches accordingly to be especially on the look out for those who subtly change the core contents of the Gospel upon which the message of salvation is built.

Fee, Gordon D. "The First Epistle to the Corinthian." In *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.

Fee's scholarly, detailed, evangelical commentary provides very useful insights both into the core creed of 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 as well as Paul's psychology as a preacher whose primary passion was to preserve and present the truth behind the message of the cross. Fee believes that the creed of 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 was passed on to Paul by the apostles as a sacred statement that should be guarded at all costs. The statement, while it appears close to the end of the letter, is actually the letter's focal point, and Fee gives several examples from other parts of the letter showing how Paul considered accurate proclamation and defense of the cross to be his central apostolic charge. Preachers today would do well to recover that central passion.

CHAPTER FOUR THE PROJECT

A. SETTING FOR TALKS ON PENAL SUBSTITUTION

The following talks will be given initially to a group of pastors and lay preachers from the city of Aberdeen where I minister. I have invited fifteen preachers with whom I meet once-a-month in the city to what I have called an “interactive seminar” on the topic of penal substitution. These pastors come from various denominations and represent a broad spectrum of the evangelical church in the city. As the aim of the talks is to encourage preachers to defend the doctrine of penal substitution from their pulpits, I have limited the invitation to evangelicals only. I have encouraged these full time pastors to bring with them others in their sphere of influence in the city who preach at least once-a-month. In Aberdeen there are several influential preachers who are not formally ordained, but who read widely on theological themes, and would benefit from the talks. I also want to ensure a large enough number of participants to make the feedback they provide viable.

The talks will take place on November 30, 2006 in the main hall of Deeside Christian Fellowship Church in Milltimber, Aberdeen, where I minister. This venue provides easy access for all the pastors to attend, as well as an LCD projector and screen to use for powerpoint slides of the key quotes used in the talks. The evening will last from 7:30pm until approximately 9:30pm, with a Question and Answer session in between each of the three talks, and a break for refreshments at the end of the second talk. With the amount of material that the talks cover, and the technical nature of some of the discussion, I feel it is important to take time for

interaction to allow the material to be absorbed, and to keep minds fresh during a long evening. Ideally I would have liked to give the talks over two separate evenings, but pastors are busy, and there are no guarantees that they would have time to participate in more than one evening.

B. THE TALKS ON PENAL SUBSTITUTION

There follows an outline of the talks, to be handed out on the night, so that the participants can follow the train of thought, and can take notes on what they find helpful.

TALK ONE: THE ISSUE AT STAKE

I. Entrusted with the Gospel

- A. Biblical preaching combines both joy and fear
 - 1. We are 'entrusted' with the oracles of God (Rom 3:2)
 - 2. The Gospel belongs to God (1 Tim 1:11)
- B. Be aware of 'false teaching' that compromises the Gospel
 - 1. 'Keep watch over yourselves and your flock' (Ac 20)
 - 2. There are seductive voices in the church today
- C. Be especially aware of controversial atonement views
 - 1. Blomberg - 'false 'Gospel' teaching most condemned'
 - 2. False Gospel leads to 'believing in vain' (1 Cor 15:2)

II. *The Lost Message of Jesus* and its Critics

- A. Chalke rejects 'penal substitution'
 - 1. Minimizes sin and God's holiness
 - 2. Finds penal substitution 'morally dubious'
- B. Chalke is just one of several who question penal substitution
 - 1. McLaren and the 'Emerging Church' in the States
 - 2. NT Wright, Joel Green and James Dunn as scholars
- C. The Penal Substitution debate is key for evangelicalism
 - 1. EA debate with Steve Chalke (2005)
 - 2. What is an evangelical?
 - 3. Are there 'non negotiables' in the Gospel?
- D. Preaching is where the battle is fought...

TALK 2: PROPITIATION: THE HISTORICAL DEBATE

I. Atonement Theories Throughout History

A. 'Ransom to Satan Theory' (Origen, 300 AD)

1. To whom was the ransom paid? (Mk 10:45)
2. Gustaf Aulen - 'classical view of the church'

B. 'Satisfaction Theory' (Anselm, 1100 AD)

1. God's holiness needs to be 'satisfied' by the cross
2. 'God the just is satisfied to look on Him and pardon me'

C. Other Atonement Theories

1. Exemplarist (Socinus), demonstration of love (Abelard)
2. Chalke's is a mixture of these 2 theories

D. 'Satisfaction' is primary among these atonement theories

1. 'Example', 'love' and 'victory over Satan' all biblical
2. But 'satisfaction' only theory that deals with God and sin

II. The 'Propitiation' Debate: Dodd v. Morris

A. C.H. Dodd (1931) questioned the notion of 'propitiation'

1. Propitiation is too pagan a notion
2. God is never the 'object' of OT sacrifices
3. God's wrath is simply the 'cause and effect' of sin
4. English translations have taken out 'propitiation'

B. Leon Morris (1965) attacked Dodd's view

1. Wrath is context of OT sacrifices, and

2. Retributive wrath is clearly seen in OT theology
3. God's wrath is consistent, not like pagan gods

TALK 3: PREACHING PROPITIATION FROM SCRIPTURE

I. New Testament References to ‘Propitiation’ (*hilaskesthai* word group)

A. Rom 3:25 (God presented Christ as a *hilasterion*)

1. Wrath context of 1:18-3:19
2. God presents Christ as ‘hilasterion’ (mercy seat)
3. Defense of the justice of God (3:26)

B. 1 Jn 2:2 (Christ is the *hilasmos* for our sins)

1. Context is Christ as ‘advocate’ (2:1)
2. ‘God placates God’ is a glorious mystery

C. 1 Jn 4:10 (This is love...God sent his Son as a *hilasmos* for our sin)

1. Propitiation is the definition of divine love
2. Love without holiness is not divine love

II. Wider NT evidence for propitiation

A. Christ the High Priest in Hebrews (uses *hilaskesthai* several times)

1. a ‘merciful’ high priest
2. ‘in service to God’

B. The ‘cup’ of Gethsemane, and its OT allusions

III. Preaching Propitiation Today

A. Have we moved away from preaching ‘the cross’? (1 Cor 2:2)

B. Preach OT God of holiness (Gen 3, Lev 16, Josh 7, Num 25, Isa 6)

- C. Present propitiation with sensitivity (Father and Son in unison)
- D. Preach unpopular truth with courage

TALK ONE: THE ISSUE AT STAKE

PART ONE: ‘ENTRUSTED WITH THE GOSPEL’

I have a T-Shirt at home with the name “Trinity Evangelical Divinity School” emblazoned across the chest. That T-shirt is very precious to me, not just because it reminds me of life shaping days I spent at seminary, but also because of the logo on the T-shirt. The logo is placed, perhaps deliberately, right above the heart. It reads in bold Greek letters “pisteuthenai to euangelion,” meaning “entrusted with the Gospel.” It’s taken from 1 Thessalonians 2:4.

This logo is a reminder to me of my sacred calling as a preacher. I have been “entrusted with the Gospel.” Whatever else my ministry as a pastor may lead me to, this is the core calling God has given to me – he has entrusted me with his Gospel.

That calling is both joyful and fearful – and it’s important that I am constantly aware of the joy and the fear as I preach. It is joyful because God has called me to preach the same Gospel to others that first drew me to the love of God in Christ. I don’t preach it as an objective observer analysing a legal document. I am emotionally involved in it. I experience its wonder and constraints in my heart every day. I cannot help but be moved as I preach it, and my primary emotion is joy. This Gospel has the same power to transform the people I’m preaching to, with all their doubts and fears, as it has transformed mine – what a joyful thing it is to be called to preach the Gospel.

But alongside the joy of the calling, there is a certain fear. It's a healthy fear that every preacher needs to guard. Think for a moment about some other places where this word 'entrusted' is used in relation to communicating God's words. When Paul is talking in Romans 3 about the privileges that the Jewish nation enjoy, he says, "First of all, they have been entrusted with the very oracles of God" (Rom 3:2). In other places Paul mentions other privileges Jews enjoyed such as the temple, being in covenant with God, the rite of circumcision and so on. But the number one privilege that set them apart as God's people is this – they were "entrusted with the very oracles of God."

Jews were uniquely responsible to God for conveying his commands accurately to the world. They were to use their outstanding privilege to be the world's teachers. How often did Jesus rebuke the Scribes and Pharisees in his day for failing to discharge their sacred trust - for teaching the people a twisted, man-made version of the message God had entrusted to them? Jesus reserved his fiercest rhetoric for those who considered themselves teachers of the word of God, but who were not faithful to their calling.

This word 'entrusted' is very important as we think about our calling as preachers. God is trusting us that we will pass on the words he has given us in a way that does full justice to those words. Paul uses this same word "entrusted" when he is describing his own call to preach. In 1 Timothy 1:11 he talks about "the sound doctrine that conforms to the glorious Gospel of the blessed God which he entrusted to me." You can almost taste the healthy fear Paul has for his task as a preacher. The Gospel contains a "body of doctrine" that Paul considered "sound."

That suggests there was other teaching going on in the church that was not “sound,” and it was Paul’s duty to expose and discard it for the sake of the church.

This sound body of doctrine belongs to God and it is “glorious” – it is packed with divine power to save the souls of men and women. God takes his Gospel very personally. In Romans 1 Paul says that it is “the Gospel of God...concerning his Son” (Rom 1:1, 4). God is passionate about his gospel. He is very protective of it. And just as he trusted Paul, God is trusting you and me as preachers to deliver the contents of this Gospel intact and complete to our hearers. We are “entrusted with the oracles of God.” What an incredible privilege and responsibility we have as preachers today. If the Jews were held accountable for their teaching of God’s law, how much more are we accountable for our preaching of the Gospel of grace, the Gospel that concerns his Son, the Gospel that is the power of God for the salvation of those who believe?

This is what we mean by having a healthy fear when we take the pulpit. It is good to think about the Gospel we are preaching – to be asking ourselves regularly “is my preaching sound? Does it line up with the Gospel that has been entrusted to me? Or am I being seduced by voices outside the Scriptures to preach a Gospel that is a distortion of God’s Gospel – a Gospel that lacks the power God has planted within it?”

That is the issue we are examining today. It would be difficult to think of a more crucial issue we could discuss together as preachers. Biblical preaching is both a delightful and a dangerous pursuit. Matthew Simpson’s description of the preacher’s task sums it up,

“His throne is the pulpit; he stands in Christ’s stead; his message is the Word of God; around him are immortal souls; the Saviour, unseen, is beside him; the Holy Spirit broods over the congregation; angels gaze upon the scene, and heaven and hell await the issue. What associations, and what vast responsibility!”⁸⁸

If we are going to protect ourselves as preachers, and our congregations, from false teaching that compromises God’s glorious gospel, we need to be aware of the kind of doctrine preachers and writers in the UK and beyond are teaching. That begins by keeping track of the most popular books in our evangelical bookstores, and the kind of public debates that are going on all the time over the internet.

The young people in my church download sermons from the internet every week. They are often more aware of the latest books from leading Christian writers than I am. But they don’t necessarily have a strong enough theological framework to know what is sound doctrine and what is dangerous teaching. They relate much more to the preachers who “grab” them, who captivate their attention with passionate presentations. If we are to discharge our sacred trust, we need to be deeply concerned about the teaching our people are listening to – because they are listening to much more than the sermon we have agonized over for Sunday morning.

Are they hearing a twisted Gospel that they will then share with others, like a virus that spreads, or are they hearing the “glorious Gospel of God, concerning his Son?” Not only that, but I also have to be very wary about what I am listening to and reading as a preacher. Our congregations are relying on us to know not only the truth to declare, but the falsehoods that need to be countered. We have this dual

⁸⁸ Matthew Simpson, *Lectures in Preaching* (New York: Phillips & Hunt, 1879), 166.

role as preachers of proclaiming and protecting the Gospel that has been entrusted to us. Wasn't that the emotional appeal that Paul gave to the Ephesian elders when he said "goodbye" to them? Acts 20:28 reads,

"Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers...Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard." (Ac 20:28, 30-31)

We aren't just proclaimers, we are protectors. Of course, in a post Christian culture like ours, where media sound bites and television pictures are the dominant form of communication, it is a battle simply to get people to come into church and listen to anything Christian. In that context, it is easy for our focus to be much more on how engaging our preaching is, rather than on how true it is. There is a constant pressure today to think about our preaching in terms of what is exciting, of what will hold our peoples' attention, rather than to assess our preaching according to its truth content – and we have to be careful to get the balance right. The temptation to be careless about truth because we are so concerned about gaining an audience, is a more pressing issue in our day than perhaps in any day before us.

We also feel the weight of competing with all these wonderful communicators across the world. They are available to our congregation at the touch of a button. It's easy to turn a blind eye to the questions "am I preaching the Gospel God entrusted to me? Am I preaching to my people such a truth filled, accurate Gospel, that I am at the same time combating the seductive voices my people are taking in?"

So what are these seductive voices that are threatening to compromise the truth of the Gospel? If we become aware of what we are battling against, we will

have a clearer mind to know how to protect and enrich our own congregations. I want to suggest to you that one of the most dangerous seductive voices today both in the UK and the US, relates to views being expressed by popular Christian teachers regarding the nature of the atonement. Any time we hear in the media or in the Christian press that someone is writing controversial views on the atonement, our preaching antennae need to be awakened. Nothing should arouse our concern more than questionable views of the atonement, because the atonement is at the heart of this glorious Gospel that God has entrusted to us. New views on spiritual gifts, or the role of women or millennial speculation may arouse our interest. But we must be especially sensitive to the new winds that are blowing, questioning an orthodox understanding of the atonement.

Craig Blomberg is a New Testament Professor at Denver Seminary in the States, and he wrote a fascinating article recently entitled “The New Testament Definition of Heresy (or When Do Jesus and the Apostles really Get Mad).” In this article Blomberg briefly surveys false teaching in the New Testament and comes to the conclusion that Paul did not treat all heresy the same way. The closer the heresy comes to core elements of the Gospel, the more fearsome Paul’s language becomes. For example, when Paul is writing to the Thessalonians, he feels he needs to correct some of their misunderstandings about eschatology. But his reproof is gentle. It’s very much in a tone of encouragement – “...now let me remind you brothers.”

But when Paul comes across teaching that threatens the very heart of the Gospel he has been preaching, he doesn’t hold back in his condemnation. In fact he

speaks with the kind of language that we shy away from today. He says to the Galatians who were being bewitched by Judaizers, “if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned” (Gal 1:8).

It would be difficult to find a stronger condemnation than “let him be eternally condemned.” When Paul is writing to Philippi and he comes across Jewish teachers who were telling the Gentile converts that they needed to be circumcised for salvation, Paul calls the teachers “those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh” (Phil 3:2).

Paul reserves his harshest words for Christian teachers who were twisting his message on core Gospel issues. He is furious because he knows that if this false teaching gains a hearing in the church, the very salvation of men and women would be in jeopardy. In 1 Corinthians 15, you remember, Paul is defending the truth of the resurrection in the face of teachers who were opposing it. In that emotive and glorious passage, Paul warns Christians in Corinth that if they followed some of these strange views about resurrection, they risked “believing in vain” (1 Cor 15:2). And the rest of 1 Corinthians 15 is taken up with Paul defending Christ’s resurrection as core truth around which the Gospel stands or falls. “If Christ has not been raised from the dead your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Cor 15:19).

So when we hear or read about preachers and teachers who are advancing controversial theories about the atonement, then we need to be on high alert. It’s like the government raising the threat levels for a terrorist attack. There is a core

element of the Gospel at stake. It is a Gospel we have been entrusted with. A Gospel that contains within it God's power to save. The stakes could not be higher.

PART 2: *THE LOST MESSAGE OF JESUS AND ITS CRITICS*

If you are a preacher here today, you have been “entrusted with the Gospel.”

Preaching is a joyful calling because the Gospel contains God’s power to transform peoples’ lives. But it is also a fearful calling – we are responsible for conveying faithfully the message that God has given us. We need to be assessing carefully the ideas being put forward by popular Christian teachers, especially when they relate to core Gospel issues like the atonement. We need to protect our own hearts and our congregations from those who may be twisting the Gospel message and emptying it of its power.

In 2003, Zondervan published a book by Steve Chalke entitled the *Lost Message of Jesus*. I’m sure Steve Chalke needs no introduction to us. He is a regular speaker at mainstream evangelical events such as Spring Harvest. He has been a popular TV personality with his weekly contributions to GMTV. He is also the founder of the *Oasis* movement which has close links to Youth for Christ and the Salvation Army. Steve Chalke is perhaps the most recognizable Christian communicator in Britain today. Don Carson describes him as “an exhilarating speaker, as effective on television as he is in person.”

Chalke’s book has generated quite a storm among evangelicals in the UK. And we need to be particularly alert to this storm as preachers because the controversy revolves around Chalke’s views on the atonement. In a nutshell, Chalke has rejected the orthodox evangelical view of penal substitution held by evangelicals for centuries. The book is not about the atonement per se, but about Jesus’ radical mission to the poor and the marginalized. Chalke is calling the

church to share Jesus' radical love and compassion for outcasts. He has a vivid writing style and his book offers many important challenges about how we express the love of Christ in our generation. His controversial views on the atonement come in the last chapter of the book, but there are several alarming views expressed in the run up to the final chapter.

For example, Chalke seems to minimize the effects of the Fall. He tells us we have spent too long talking about man's original sin, and too little time talking about man's original goodness. Perhaps in line with his weak view of the Fall, Chalke very much downplays God's holiness and justice, and he emphasizes the love of God so strongly that it appears at times that love is the only facet of God's character worth considering.

Don Carson claims that Chalke comes close to mocking the Old Testament temple system that highlighted God's holiness and man's sinfulness. Chalke does not mention that temple worship in the Old Testament, built around the inner chambers of the temple and their progressive degrees of holiness, was created by God to teach us about his righteous character.

All of these unusual views prepare the way for the final chapter. When Chalke starts talking about the cross, we find his most alarming teachings. Here is the paragraph that has caused the most controversy,

"The fact is that the cross isn't a form of cosmic child abuse – a vengeful father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, people both inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that however, is that such a statement stands in contradiction to the statement "God is love."

What Chalke is clearly attacking here is the orthodox evangelical view of penal substitution. It's important that we understand just what we mean by penal substitution so that we can assess properly what Chalke is saying. Penal substitution is the view that Christ died in our place. He took upon himself the just punishment for our sins. At the heart of penal substitution is the notion of "propitiation," and it is "propitiation" that Chalke is most scathing about. The word propitiation means to "appease someone's wrath." Propitiation is the doctrine that God the Father appeased his own righteous wrath against human sin, by pouring out that wrath on his Son. Chalke calls this a "twisted version of events." He suggests that it is an unnecessary barrier that prevents people inside and outside the church from seeing the full beauty of God's love.

The phrase that has drawn most criticism from evangelicals is Chalke referring to the doctrine of propitiation as "cosmic child abuse." That is a phrase that was first coined by liberal feminist theologians who felt that the doctrine of propitiation should be rejected, not because it wasn't in the Bible, but because it promoted violence towards the weak and the helpless. Liberation theologians have also used the term, but Chalke is the first mainstream evangelical to use it in a popular level book.

Steve Chalke is not the only well known Christian teacher who is casting doubts on a traditional view of penal substitution. I'm sure some of you will be aware of a movement among evangelicals in the United States being named the "Emerging Church." The "Emerging Church" is a title that covers a wide spectrum of Christian churches and leaders who are wanting to reach out in new ways to our

postmodern culture. The “Emerging Church” has sought to set aside unnecessary beliefs and dogma that they see as unbiblical, that prevent evangelicals from communicating the Gospel effectively to postmodern listeners. They strongly emphasize the need for the church to be a living community, and for evangelicals to embrace the church in all its expressions.

Steve Chalke is considered a leader of the “Emerging Church” movement. In the United States the most recognized spokesman for the “Emerging Church” is a pastor called Brian McLaren. Many of McLaren’s books are on sale in local Christian bookstores. He is a very popular and articulate writer, and he has been a strong supporter of Chalke’s book and his views on the atonement.

Don Carson, a very highly considered conservative evangelical theologian in the States, has warned of the danger that Steve Chalke and Brian McLaren’s views present to the Gospel today. Carson has written a book entitled *Becoming Conversant with the Emerging Church*. The book has been widely acclaimed in the evangelical press for its balanced assessment of the Emerging Church. And in the book Carson highlights *The Lost Message of Jesus* and another book by McLaren called *The Secret Message of Jesus* as being typical of Emerging Church atonement theology. Carson goes as far as to say that Chalke and McLaren have “largely abandoned the Gospel.” That is a very serious statement to make from a respected theologian who has set out to give a balanced assessment of an influential church movement.

Leaders like Chalke and McLaren are constantly calling the church to re-examine some of the fundamental doctrines that have characterized evangelical

belief, and they have particularly honed in on penal substitution. The very titles of these books – *The Lost Message of Jesus*, and *The Secret Message of Jesus* tell you something about their approach. These titles suggest that over the centuries the evangelical church has somehow missed the true message of Jesus. We have been lulled into accepting theology, like penal substitution, which is very off putting to postmodern people who are hearing the Gospel for the first time. We need to reject that kind of theology if our Gospel is going to impact today's culture that is so sensitive to issues of violence and child abuse. That is their approach.

In addition to influential popular level teachers like Chalke and McLaren, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have also questioned an orthodox understanding of penal substitution. In America, Joel Green and Mark Baker, who are respected evangelical seminary professors, have cast doubts on traditional views of penal substitution in a book called *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*. Again this is an influential and widely read book. In the UK, N.T. Wright, the prolific writer and influential Bishop of Durham, has also endorsed Chalke's views. Wright has expressed views on penal substitution as well as the doctrine of justification by faith alone that have troubled many evangelicals today.

So you see, as preachers today who are entrusted with the Gospel, we simply cannot ignore what influential men such as Chalke, McLaren and NT Wright are teaching. Books by these men are among the bestsellers in our Christian bookstores. There is a debate raging at the heart of the evangelical church today, not about peripheral issues like spiritual gifts, or modes of baptism, or the second coming, but about core elements of the Gospel. The meaning of the cross itself

seems “up for grabs” in many circles. This is not an issue that will soon blow away. High profile debates are taking place on both sides of the Atlantic that will have serious consequences in days to come. That is one of the reasons I wanted to pursue this doctoral project. The future of the Gospel in the UK, and what it means to be evangelical, depends on what preachers like you and me believe and preach about this pivotal issue.

You are probably already aware that the Evangelical Alliance, the largest body in the UK representing evangelicals, challenged Steve Chalke to a debate in Westminster last year. Over 1000 evangelicals were in attendance from all denominational backgrounds. While the Alliance has held on to the notion of penal substitution in its statement of faith, the debate led to a slight alteration in its wording. Since that time the EA have been very keen to mend its relationship with Steve Chalke, even though he has not retracted his views. If you visit the EA website, you find a series of papers written by academics, half in favour of Chalke’s position, half defending an orthodox view. It leaves the impression that this topic is open for healthy discussion among evangelicals. That you can still be an evangelical and not believe that Christ was taking our place on the cross under the judgement of God, bearing the awful price of human sin.

I simply don’t believe that is true. I think there are some core Gospel truths that are not open for discussion. There are core Gospel truths that determine the destiny of heaven or hell for the people to whom we preach. It is a hallmark of our postmodern society that we open everything up to debate. That all debate is healthy. That truth is subjective. One of the hallmarks of the Emerging Church is

that they want to “continue the conversation” about core doctrine that defines the Gospel. I believe that to be a very dangerous stance.

I hope we will see that certain Bible truths are non-negotiable. That the Bible clearly tells us they are non negotiable. That those non-negotiable truths are the same whether you call yourself Charismatic or Reformed or Pentecostal or Baptist or Independent or Emerging. That our job as preachers is to show our congregations what is non-negotiable, and to spend a significant amount of preaching time re-affirming those non-negotiables. Whether we like it or not, we need to be aware of these alternate views of the atonement so that we are clear in our minds about the Gospel we are preaching, and can lead our congregations through the confusion caused by public debates between well known evangelical leaders.

But before we can assess the debate about penal substitution and propitiation, we need to have a firm grasp on the issues. We need to understand both what the Scriptures teach about these issues, and how the church has understood the Bible’s teaching historically. In our next session we’ll begin by examining various theories of the atonement throughout church history. We’ll follow that up by examining key texts from Scripture, and how theologians on both sides of the debate have understood these texts.

TALK TWO: PENAL SUBSTITUTION: THE HISTORICAL DEBATE

PART ONE: ATONEMENT THEORIES THROUGHOUT CHURCH HISTORY

As preachers we are entrusted with the Gospel. That means we need to be aware of various teachings available to our congregation that threaten to distort the Gospel. We need to be especially wary of new interpretations of penal substitution and propitiation, because the work of Christ on the cross is the indispensable heart of the Gospel. If we are going to assess the current debate about penal substitution we need to know something of the history of atonement theories.

One of the attacks directed at evangelicals who hold to the doctrine of penal substitution, is that for many centuries the prevailing view of the church had no room for penal substitution. The dominant atonement theory for the first thousand years of the church was known as the “Ransom Theory.” This theory was developed mainly by the early church father, Origen, in about 300 AD. The theory states that Christ died to pay a ransom to Satan for the souls of men and women, because Satan held humanity in his grip. Those who hold this view cite verses like (Mk 10:45) “Christ gave his life as a ransom for many.” The question then arises, “to whom did Christ pay the ransom?” Origen believed it did not make sense to say that the ransom was paid back to God, because God was the one who sent his own Son to pay the ransom. Therefore the ransom must have been paid to Satan, especially as there are so many passages in the New Testament that see the cross in terms of a victory over Satan.

You can see how this atonement theory clashes with the notion of propitiation. Propitiation suggests that the sacrifice of Christ frees us from the wrath of God rather than the grip of Satan. But early church theologians did not see clearly this “Godward” aspect of the atonement. The Swedish scholar Gustaf Aulen wrote a very influential book a few years ago called *Christus Victor*. He suggests in the book that the Ransom to Satan theory is the “classical” view of the church. The thought of Jesus’ cross appeasing God’s wrath did not come about until much later, so he concludes that the “Ransom Theory” is the original and most important atonement theory in the church.

It is true that the Ransom Theory held sway in the early church for the first thousand years, but that is not the whole story. If you look at the writings of many of the church fathers, they speak quite openly about penal substitution long before it ever became a developed doctrine. Even Origen, the theologian most recognized for the Ransom Theory, spoke in very clear terms in his commentaries about propitiation. Here is what Origen says in his commentary on Rom 3:25-26,

“God has manifested his righteousness and given Christ to be our redemption. He has made him *our propitiator*...for God is just and therefore could not justify the unjust. Therefore *he required the intervention of a propitiator*, so that by having faith in him, those who could not be justified by their own works might be justified.”⁸⁹

This is one of several quotes we could have given from early church fathers that shows clear evidence of the doctrine of penal substitution and propitiation in the earliest days of the church.⁹⁰ Just because their ideas were not fully developed,

⁸⁹ Origen, “Commentary on Romans, Romans 3:25-26,” in *Ancient Commentary on Scripture: The New Testament, VI, Romans*, ed. G. Bray (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998), 101-103.

⁹⁰ See the upcoming book by Steve Jeffrey, Mike Ovey and Andrew Sachs, *Pierced for our Transgressions* (Leicester: IVP, 2007), 161-203. A whole chapter quotes liberally from eminent

does not mean that the early church did not believe in penal substitution. They simply had not formulated the doctrine formally. Let's remember that the doctrine of the Trinity was not properly formed in the church until the time of Augustine, more than 400 years after the death of Christ. Yet I'm sure not one of us would deny that the Trinity is clearly biblical and at the heart of our understanding of God. The historian Philip Schaff makes a useful observation about the theology of the early church fathers. He says,

“...the primitive church teachers lived more in the thankful enjoyment of redemption than in logical reflection upon it. We perceive in their exhibitions of this blessed mystery the language rather of enthusiastic feeling than of careful definition and acute analysis.”⁹¹

Although it was later theologians who defined and carefully analysed the doctrine of penal substitution, that does not make it any less valid. This is an important point because Steve Chalke and the Emerging Church would say that it wasn't until the Reformation in the 1500's that penal substitution was even thought of.

The man who paved the way for the doctrine of penal substitution to be properly formulated in the church was Anselm, the Archbishop of Canterbury, in about 1100 AD. The atonement theory that he is known for is called the “Satisfaction Theory.” He saw clearly this “Godward” aspect of the atonement. Theologians like Augustine and Pope Gregory the Great had suggested that the

theologians such as Justin Martyr, Gregory of Nazianzus, Athanasius, Gregory the Great and Augustine, clearly displaying their belief in penal substitution.

⁹¹ P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church, Vol. 2: Ante-Nicene Christianity (100-325)* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 584-588.

atonement had a Godward dimension, but it was Anselm who fully developed the thought.

Anselm said that the death of Christ brought satisfaction to something in the character of God. The atonement was not directed at Satan because Satan is a created being. He does not own humans in any way. The cross is a remedy for sin, and sin is an act of rebellion against God, not against Satan. Anselm was particularly concerned to defend the honor of God that is offended by human sin. It is God's honor that needs to be satisfied through the work of the cross. God is just and holy. He cannot simply overlook sin – his honor would never allow him to. God's honor is satisfied in one of two ways. It is either satisfied by the sinner facing God's wrath, and paying for his own sin. Or it is satisfied by God pouring out his wrath on his own Son. Either way, it is something in the character of God that needs to be satisfied if sinners like us are to be forgiven.

That is the "Satisfaction Theory" in a nutshell. It became much more finely tuned and developed during the time of the Reformation, but it was Anselm who started the ball rolling. Even those who are sceptical about penal substitution cannot deny that this is the theory that has dominated evangelical belief for the last five centuries, and its roots go back to the earliest days of the church. Many of our best known hymns today are packed with penal substitution. Think about the hymn "Before the Throne of God Above,"

"When Satan tempts me to despair, and tells me of the guilt within,
Upward I look and see him there, who made an end to all my sin,
Because the sinless Saviour died, my sinful soul is counted free,
For God the just is satisfied, to look on him and pardon me."

Penal substitution is based on the conviction that something in the character of God needs to be satisfied, before he can freely forgive our sins – “God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.” You can see from this hymn just how basic and fundamental penal substitution is to our understanding of the Gospel. It is the basis for God forgiving me every day out of love, without compromising his holiness and justice.

It’s important at this stage to mention two other atonement theories that have been popular in church history. I mention these because they are very similar to the views that Steve Chalke holds in his book. The first is called the “Socinian Theory.” This theory was developed by Faustus and Laelius Socinus in the sixteenth century. The Socinian Theory sees the cross primarily as an example. It tells us that the real value of Jesus’ death is that it presents us with an example of the kind of dedication we are to practice as Christians in our lives. The Socinian Theory says nothing about how sin is dealt with, it simply says “be like Jesus, who sacrificed himself for others.”

The other closely related theory is called the “Moral Influence Theory,” which was developed by Peter Abelard. Abelard said that the cross is purely and simply a public demonstration of the love of God. The cross has nothing to do with satisfying God’s justice and righteousness, it is simply putting on public display his immense love. Steve Chalke’s view of the atonement is very similar to the Socinian and Moral Influence theory. It is a reworking of old atonement theories that the church has not found convincing in the past. Chalke sees Jesus purely as an example for us of how we should demonstrate God’s love to the world around.

Issues of sin and holiness and the satisfaction of God have little or nothing to do with the cross. In fact Chalke would say it is morally repugnant to talk about God the Father punishing his own Son.

Of course orthodox evangelicals accept, in some sense, all of these different theories of the atonement. The Scriptures are quite clear that Jesus on the cross won a victory over Satan. The New Testament is full of that thought. Colossians 2 says “He disarmed the powers and authorities, making a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.” We do not accept that a ransom was paid to Satan for the souls of men and women, because Satan does not have that kind of authority over us. But we do believe an important aspect of the atonement is Christ’s victory over Satan.

Likewise we believe that Christ set an example for us when he died on the cross. 1 Peter 2 teaches us that – Christ set us an example that we should follow in his footsteps. Just as suffering was the pathway to glory for Christ, so we must pass through suffering as his disciples before we get to glory. We need to lay down our bodies as living sacrifices holy and pleasing to God, just as Christ did. And of course we believe that the cross was the ultimate demonstration of God’s love. To some extent orthodox evangelicals hold all these atonement theories together.

But here is the vital issue. For evangelicals, the “Satisfaction Theory” is the core of the atonement. It is the element that holds all the other strands of the atonement together. Millard Erickson who has written the world’s most widely read Evangelical Systematic Theology text, says that it is the “most basic” atonement theory, the one that “makes the others possible.” At the cross God was

dealing primarily with his own holy hatred of sin. No other atonement theory deals with sin as an offence against a holy God. This is where penal substitution and propitiation come from. If you see sin as an offence against God's holiness and justice, then sin must be dealt with by satisfying that holiness and judgement. Someone has to pay the price for sin – either the sinner or the sinner's substitute. That's the logic behind the cross.

The New Testament scholar, Tom Schreiner, in a recent address entitled "Penal Substitution as the Heart of the Gospel," summarizes the orthodox evangelical view,

"The theory of penal substitution is the heart and soul of an evangelical view of the atonement. I am not claiming that it is the *only* truth about the atonement taught in the scriptures. Nor am I claiming that penal substitution is emphasized in every piece of literature, or that every author articulates clearly penal substitution. I am claiming that penal substitution functions as the anchor and foundation for all other dimensions of the atonement when the scriptures are considered as a canonical whole. I define penal substitution as follows: The Father, because of his love for human beings, sent his Son (who offered himself willingly and gladly) to satisfy his justice, so that Christ took the place of sinners. The punishment and penalty we deserved was laid on Jesus Christ instead of us, so that in the cross both God's holiness and love are manifested.

The riches of what God has accomplished in Christ for his people are not exhausted by penal substitution. The multifaceted character of the atonement must be recognized to do justice to the canonical witness. God's people are impoverished if Christ's triumph over evil powers at the cross is slighted, or Christ's exemplary love is shoved to the side, or the healing bestowed on believers by Christ's cross and resurrection is downplayed. While not denying the wide-ranging character of Christ's atonement, I am arguing that penal substitution is foundational and the heart of the atonement."

But now we have to move from the logic of the "Satisfaction Theory" to the debates that have been raging about penal substitution and propitiation. Where has

the debate about propitiation come from? Why has the doctrine of penal substitution been questioned? That's what we will examine now.

PART TWO: LEON MORRIS AND C.H. DODD: THE PROPITIATION DEBATE

At the heart of the doctrine of penal substitution is the notion of propitiation – the belief that Christ appeased the wrath of God through his sacrifice on the cross. It may surprise you to realize that the debate about propitiation was raging long before Steve Chalke and his friends got on the bandwagon. Back in 1931 an English scholar called C.H. Dodd wrote a very influential article questioning the doctrine of propitiation, a doctrine that had been accepted by evangelicals for centuries. Dodd’s writing is very technical, so let me try and summarize it in simple terms. Dodd believed that the idea of God appeasing his own anger through a ritual sacrifice was morally questionable. Dodd said that’s how the pagan deities behaved in the Old Testament. Old Testament pagans believed that their gods were angry with them, and so they offered sacrifices to appease the anger of their gods.

Dodd said, “how can we think about the God of the Bible like that? It does not make sense for God to appease his own anger. In fact it is grotesque to think that the God of the Bible is angry at our sin, and will punish us for our sin, unless a sacrifice is offered to appease him. That is a pagan notion.” Dodd produced a series of word studies on the verb that is translated “propitiation” in our Bibles. And he said that each time the verb is used in the context of the sacrificial system, God is never the object of the verb. In other words, when the lamb is slaughtered on the altar in OT ritual, that slaughter is not directed towards God – the sacrifice does not satisfy something in God, it is simply a way of dealing with sin.

Dodd never says how the sacrifice deals with sin. He simply says it deals with sin. So Dodd concluded that the word “propitiation” – the appeasing of wrath, should be removed from the Bible. Instead we should use the word “expiation.” The word “expiation” simply means that sin is dealt with. It removes any idea that God’s anger is appeased.

That leads us to another important strand of CH Dodd’s beliefs. Dodd believed that there was no such thing as the retributive wrath of God in the Old Testament. Every time the Bible writers talk about God’s wrath leading to judgement, they are simply talking about the inevitable outcome of sin. If you sin, bad things will happen to you, not because God is judging you out of anger, but simply because sin itself leads to bad outcomes. Again Dodd doesn’t explain why sin leads to bad things happening, he just says it does.

So if, like C.H. Dodd, you don’t believe that God is angry with human beings because of their sin and needs to punish them out of a sense of holy justice, then you don’t have to believe the “grotesque” notion that God’s anger needs to be appeased through a sacrifice. C.H. Dodd rescues us from having to preach in our sensitive post-modern generation that God appeases his own wrath by punishing his own Son in our place at the cross. Take out the word “propitiation” with all its connotations of wrath, put in the word “expiation” which simply says that sin is dealt with or removed in some way, and everyone is happy.

It is quite amazing the impact that C.H. Dodd’s research had on the translators of the Bible. If you look at modern translations, they are split down the middle on this issue. Some have taken the word “propitiation” out of the Bible,

some have left it in, and the NIV has sat on the fence. Romans 3:25 is a case in point. This is the classic verse that talks about God offering Christ as the ‘propitiation’ for our sins so that God can remain just and yet be the one who justifies those who have faith in Christ. In this verse the word “propitiation” is still retained in the Authorized Version, the Revised Version, the New American Standard Bible and the English Standard Version.

But the Revised Standard Version uses Dodd’s word “expiation,” which gives the verse a very different meaning. The Good News Bible translates it “the means by which peoples’ sins are forgiven” – in other words it paraphrases “expiation” in line with Dodd, rather than propitiation. The New English Bible also keeps things deliberately vague. Interestingly, the Living Bible excels itself with the paraphrase “to take the punishment for our sins and to end all God’s anger against us.” The New Living Translation has a similarly good paraphrase.

The NIV is the most interesting. Every time it comes across the word for propitiation, it uses the term “atoning sacrifice” – Christ is the “atoning sacrifice” for our sins. But it adds a footnote. The footnote for Rom 3:25 reads “the one who would turn aside his wrath, taking away sin.” Again it leaves you with the notion that you can be true to the text and go either way by using “expiation” and removing the wrath of God from the cross, or “propitiation” and including the wrath of God. Wherever we stand on this issue, it is clear that Dodd’s study has had a significant impact on evangelical thought and Bible translation on an issue that is central to our understanding of the Gospel.

In the late 1950's, Leon Morris began challenging Dodd's views forcefully and, according to the majority of evangelicals, successfully. Morris was not the first person to challenge Dodd's views. In 1949 Roger Nicole the New Testament scholar at Gordon-Conwell Seminary presented 25 objections to Dodd's research in a well received article. In fact Roger Nicole was the member of the NIV translation committee who argued most forcefully for the NIV to retain its footnote about propitiation.

But Leon Morris was the most persistent and rigorous refuter of Dodd. He began by looking at all of Dodd's word studies and showed how the wrath of God was the context each time the verb translated propitiation was used. He also argued that the word translated "propitiation" always means "propitiation" in the wider Greek literature of the day and not simply "expiation." Why would the translators of the LXX consistently use the word meaning "propitiation" everywhere else, when they really wanted it to mean "expiation?"

But Morris' strongest argument was to accuse Dodd of spending too much time on word studies and being blind to the big picture of Old Testament theology. In Old Testament theology there is ample evidence for the retributive wrath of God. It's important to note here that Leon Morris has spent a great deal of time writing on the meaning of the cross. He saw the doctrine of the wrath of God as so pivotal to the message of the cross that, to misunderstand it, was bound to lead to a skewed understanding of the whole of redemption. Here is a quote from Morris' book *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*,

“the idea of the wrath of God is so widespread in the Old Testament and so strongly emphasized that one would have thought it would be taken as basic that God is angry when people sin. But no...”

Morris gives several clear Old Testament examples of God’s retributive wrath, including this one from Ezekiel 7:8-9,

“I am about to pour out my wrath on you and spend my anger against you; I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for your detestable practices. I will not look on you with pity or spare you; I will repay you in accordance with your conduct and the detestable practices among you. Then you will know that it is I the Lord who strikes the blow.”

Phrases like “spend my anger against you” and “judge you according to your conduct” and “repay you for your detestable practices” point clearly to the notion of God’s retributive wrath. Of course these are not pleasant or easy topics to talk about in any generation. But perhaps especially in our post modern generation where awareness of sin and personal accountability to God are at an all time low, you can understand Christian evangelists wanting to minimize the thought of God’s retributive wrath to make the Gospel appear more accessible. We’re unlikely to gain a large audience today by talking about God’s anger against our sin. Morris claimed that was the reason so many have bought into CH Dodd’s arguments.

Morris says,

“The wrath of God is not a highly popular concept and it appeals to us when an outstanding scholar suggests that we may do away with it. We like to feel that we have nothing to fear from God.”

But Morris makes another point that is helpful for us as evangelicals as we try and come to terms with God’s wrath in conjunction with his love. We are not to think of God’s wrath as some kind of emotional outburst, like when we as humans lose our temper and fly off into a rage irrationally. It is important that we as

preachers present God's character so fully, that our people see God's wrath in the context of his other attributes. God's wrath is always consistent. Morris calls it "the inevitable outcome of God's holiness colliding with human sinfulness."

This is what separated the God of Israel from the pagan gods. The pagans were never sure what made their gods angry. Their gods were very much a reflection of their own corrupt nature – they were inconsistent and volatile. You never knew what would please them, and what would arouse their discontent. Often the pagans were running around desperately trying to find some way, any way, to appease their gods.

The God of Israel was not like that. Again and again in the Old Testament he stipulates clearly to his people the sins that make him angry, and his grace finds a way for his people to be forgiven when they sin. Ultimately God's wrath against sin stems from the beauty of his character. It is because God is consistently righteous and consistently holy that he consistently burns with anger at our rebellion to his holy laws. And if God is ever to forgive us, his righteous anger needs to be appeased. This is the central issue that motivated Leon Morris to oppose Dodd's views so strenuously.

In our next session we will move from the propitiation debate between CH Dodd and Leon Morris, to consider directly the biblical texts that speak about propitiation.

TALK THREE: PREACHING PENAL SUBSTITUTION FROM SCRIPTURE

PART ONE: PROPITIATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

There has been a heated debate regarding propitiation long before Steve Chalke wrote his controversial book. Chalke was not the first to believe that the thought of Christ appeasing the righteous wrath of God on the cross was a “twisted version of events.” But it is time now to move beyond the theories of scholars and examine the biblical texts for ourselves. However distasteful the thought of propitiation might appear to us, we need to look fairly and squarely at what the Scriptures teach, rather than rejecting a doctrine simply because it makes us feel uncomfortable.

Let’s also remember that the whole issue of propitiation and penal substitution lies at the heart of the message of the cross. We are told in Scripture that the cross is scandalous, that the message of the cross is foolishness to unbelievers, indeed that Jesus is a “stone that makes men stumble and a rock that makes them fall.” We have been warned that there are truths in the Gospel that are hard to listen to and that many people will scoff at.

But that does not make those truths any less true, or us as preachers any less accountable to declare them. So however uncomfortable issues like propitiation and the retributive wrath of God may make us feel, if the Bible clearly teaches them, and they are at the heart of the Gospel, we dare not turn a blind eye to them. This is the Gospel that belongs to God. The Gospel concerning his Son, and as preachers we are entrusted with the Gospel.

The word propitiation is only mentioned three times in the New Testament, though the word group that propitiation comes from occurs multiple times. Let's look at the three occurrences in turn. We have already mentioned Romans 3:25 where God presents Christ as the "propitiation" for our sins. As with all good exegesis we need to look at the wider context of the argument of Romans to determine whether propitiation is an appropriate translation for the Greek word *hilasterion* in Romans 3:25, which Dodd believes should be translated "expiation."

The argument begins back in Romans 1:18, where Paul says that "the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth." The wrath of God is a clear thread running through these first three chapters of Romans. Paul tells us first that the wrath of God is being revealed against the Gentile world. The Gentiles have suppressed the revelation of God that they received in creation and in their own consciences. They have descended to deplorable acts of immorality and wickedness of all kinds, and they are ripe for God's judgement.

Paul then turns to the Jews in chapter 2 and says "you are no better off. Even though you have had the privilege of receiving God's laws, you disobey those very laws yourself. So don't think that you can escape the righteous wrath of God." Romans 2:8 states "for those who are self seeking and who reject the truth...there will be wrath and anger." Paul ends this argument with his famous conclusion, quoting from various Old Testament passages, that both Jew and Gentile are under God's just condemnation – "there is no one righteous, not even one" (Rom 3:10). That conclusion is a far cry from Steve Chalke's emphasis that we have spent too

much time talking about the Fall and original sin, when we should be talking about man's goodness. According to Paul if we are not clear on the Fall and the pervasiveness of sin in the human race, we will miss the whole rationale behind the Gospel and the glorious mercy of God.

Then Paul brings his argument to a culmination in Romans 3:21-26. How has God answered our rebellion, the fact that no one does good, and in fact is not capable of doing the good that befits God's righteous character? Here is the heart-pounding glory of the Gospel. God has presented his one and only Son to be a "propitiation" through faith in his blood. As Don Carson points out in an article on this passage, the whole context of Romans up to this point is the wrath of God. And Paul now wants to defend God's justice. How can God remain just, and still forgive guilty sinners who are under his wrath? He can do this because he has presented a way in which his righteous wrath can be appeased without violating his holiness. He still rightly punishes human sin, but he does it through the sacrifice of his perfect Son. Romans 3:26 God remains "just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Christ."

Without propitiation the whole logic of this section of Romans falls flat on its face. When I read Romans 3:25-26, I don't just want to defend propitiation as a lawyer defends his case. I want to sing about propitiation. I want to revel in the beauty of the Gospel of God. And it is that very beauty which is being attacked in our day. The recent hymn by Stuart Townend and Keith Getty entitled 'O to see the Dawn' puts the matter plainly, "This the power of the cross. Christ became sin for us. Took the pain, bore the wrath, we stand forgiven at the cross."

The other two New Testament texts where we find the word translated “propitiation” are in 1 John – 1 John 2:2 and 1 John 4:10. The context of 1 John 2:2 is again important. J. Ramsey Michaels, another orthodox evangelical commentator, is well aware of the Morris/Dodd debate about propitiation versus expiation. In his comments on 1 John 2:2 he says, “literary context takes precedence over linguistic background, never more so than when the latter is inconclusive.”

If you are going to choose between expiation and propitiation as a suitable translation for the verb *hilaskomai* in 1 John 2:2, then again you need to look at the context. What is the literary context of 1 John 2? This verse sees Christ as an Advocate on the sinner’s behalf. It follows on from that well known verse, “If we confess our sins God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins.” What makes God both faithful and just to forgive our sins? What allows him to forgive us while remaining faithful to his righteous character? The answer, “we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ the Righteous One” (1 Jn 2:1). What does Jesus need to defend us from? It can only be the righteous wrath of God.

Christ can speak in our defense because he has already borne the punishment for our sins on our behalf. When God looks at the shed blood of Christ, his wrath is appeased, and forgiveness flows. Michaels concludes with these words,

“The image of Jesus as Advocate with the Father makes God the object, not the subject, of the reconciliation said to be taking place, and to that extent supports propitiation as the meaning of *hilasmos*.”

We cannot understand this image of Jesus being our Advocate, unless we accept the doctrine of propitiation. Ramsey says this leaves us to face up to a mystery, “God placates God! The Prosecutor himself sends and appoints the Defense Attorney to plead with the Prosecutor to show mercy.” But this is a mystery at the heart of the plan of salvation. “God the just is satisfied to look on him and pardon me.”

The third use of the word translated “propitiation” is in 1 John 4:10. The context of the surrounding passage is not now the wrath of God as it was in Romans 3, but the love of God. Steve Chalke claims that the notion of propitiation is warped, mainly because it devalues the love of God. But 1 John 4:10 suggests that, far from being a contradiction of love, propitiation is the very essence of divine love, “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son as a propitiation for our sin.”

Those who are striving to defend the orthodox view of propitiation today, are not doing so to prove that God is angry, or to desperately hold onto authoritarian or negative views of God. Unfortunately that is how the orthodox position is often portrayed today. What is most at stake in this propitiation debate is how we understand God’s love in conjunction with his holiness. The New Testament is teaching that God’s love is all the more loving because he cannot dismiss the holy demands of his character that would lead to our judgement, but chooses to absorb his righteous anger in himself. God provides the remedy for our rebellion through the broken body of his darling Son on a cross. That, according to

the New Testament, is the very definition of love. We should not be ashamed of that as preachers, but boast about it and proclaim it with vigour.

PART TWO: WIDER BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR PROPITIATION

As we think about how to preach the doctrine of penal substitution, and particularly propitiation from Scripture, it is important that we have a firm grasp of the New Testament evidence for this doctrine. We have just looked at the three occurrences of the word translated propitiation in the New Testament. But there is wider evidence for this doctrine than simply these three passages, not least the whole theology of the book of Hebrews. The book of Hebrews does not contain the word propitiation in our Bibles, but it does have the most occurrences of the word group “hilaskomai” from which the word propitiation comes.

Simon Kistemaker, another New Testament scholar, says Hebrews is of particular interest in the propitiation debate because it repeatedly refers to the wrath of God against human sin. Kistemaker notes fourteen different references to God’s wrath in a book that delves more than any other into the inner workings of the cross. Hebrews is also of note because it spends so much time developing the concept of Christ the High Priest, a concept that 1 John 2:2 alludes to.

Kistemaker points out that Christ is repeatedly referred to in Hebrews as a “merciful” High Priest in his service to God. He claims that every chapter of Hebrews has either an explicit or implicit reference to Christ’s High Priesthood – it is the unifying theme of the book. The idea of Christ being a merciful High Priest is crucial because, of course, mercy means God withholding from sinners what they deserve. Throughout Hebrews Christ is seen as God’s own High Priest, whose work on the cross withholds from sinners the judgement they deserve from God’s wrath.

But Hebrews holds wider implications for the propitiation debate. You may recall that C.H. Dodd's research of the Old Testament sacrificial system concluded that Old Testament sacrifices were never aimed at God because God was never the object of the verb translated "to propitiate." And yet in Hebrews Christ is God's chosen High Priest specifically appointed to render service back to God. All of which strongly implies that Christ's work on the cross is directed towards God, satisfying his righteous character. Dodd's central argument seems to be defeated by the theology of Hebrews.

A lesser but still significant argument for propitiation can be found in Christ's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane as he faced the horror of the cross. What is clear even on the surface of the text, is that Jesus sees his going to the cross as part of the Father's will for him, "My father, if it is possible may this cup be taken from me" (Mk 14:35). However uncomfortable we feel about a father asking his son to go through such horrors, the prayer of Gethsemane clearly shows this was the case.

Jesus' reference to the "cup" here is particularly interesting. The cup he is referring to is clearly the suffering that awaits him at the cross. "Cup" in this context is a very rich word theologically. It was used several times by Old Testament prophets to refer to the wrath and judgement of God. Isaiah 51:17 speaks of "the cup of his wrath" and Jeremiah 25:15, 17 refers to the "cup filled with the wine of my wrath...So I took the cup from the Lord's hand...to make them a ruin and an object of horror and scorn and cursing." Habakkuk 2:16 says, "The cup from the Lord's right hand is coming around to you, and disgrace will cover

your glory.” It seems that Mark is borrowing from this well-known prophetic understanding of “cup” and linking it with Christ’s death. At the end of his prayer Jesus is accepting the cup of wrath and judgement that is clearly coming from his Father’s hand.

The more we study propitiation and penal substitution, the more we realize we are delving into this sacred relationship between Father and Son. It’s clear from Jesus’ prayer in the Garden, as well as his High Priestly role in the book of Hebrews, that the relationship between Father and Son is at the centre of the atonement. So we need to tread extra carefully here. While it is right for us as evangelicals to defend the doctrine of propitiation, we do need to be careful how we explain it. Those who endorse Steve Chalke’s view of the atonement, are right at least to point out the sensitivity of speaking about propitiation in a day when violence towards the innocent, and child abuse, are so much in the public forum. We cannot tread blindly on this sensitive cultural context.

As we preach propitiation, we need to be very sensitive how we describe this complex relationship between Father and Son. For example, it is important that we do not paint God the Father as needing to be cajoled into forgiving sinners. If we are preaching through Hebrews for example, it is easy to find ourselves saying that Christ pleads with the Father to forgive us. That is only true if we have first of all made clear that Father and Son are one in the work of Redemption. It was the Father who, out of infinite love, sent his beloved Son to appease his own wrath. The Father wants men and women to be saved, and not incur the judgement they

deserve for their sins. It is love for us that motivates propitiation in the Father's heart.

And Christ is not a helpless victim of his Father's capricious wishes. That is why so many evangelicals have been repulsed by Chalke's term "cosmic child abuse." It gives an entirely skewed picture of propitiation in the New Testament. The Son willingly accepts his role as sacrifice and mediator between God and man. The Garden of Gethsemane shows that clearly. He always delights to do his Father's will. He was chosen before the world began to be the Lamb who carries on his shoulders the weight of the world's sin. The cross was determined in the inner counsel of the Trinity before time began.

John Stott provides a very winsome explanation of propitiation in his book *The Cross of Christ*, which to my mind is the best explanation of the doctrine. Stott says,

"We must not then speak of God punishing Jesus or of Jesus persuading God, for to do so is to set them off against each other as if they acted independently of each other or were even in conflict with each other...both God and Christ were...taking the initiative together to save sinners."

PART THREE: PREACHING PENAL SUBSTITUTION TODAY

The aim of these talks is not simply to defend an orthodox view of penal substitution, important though that is. The aim is to inspire and encourage us all to preach penal substitution with confidence and passion. As preachers we are the ones today who are entrusted with the duty of proclaiming and protecting the Gospel. What we preach in our local congregations shapes the minds of our hearers. We set the tone for how our hearers think about the cross of Christ.

Perhaps the first thing we need to ask ourselves as we assess our preaching is “how often do I preach the message of the cross? If someone was exposed to my preaching for a year, would they have a clear understanding at the end of that year, of what the cross is all about?”

At the end of the book *The Glory of the Atonement* which has been pivotal in this project, Sinclair Ferguson makes a telling observation about preaching today. He laments the fact that preachers are getting caught up with so many minor issues, that they have stopped preaching the cross. The libraries of preachers today are full of psychology textbooks. We attend conferences on “how to build the church” or the “creation versus evolution” debate, but when was the last conference we attended on the cross and its ramifications? The preaching of the cross, our central calling as Gospel ministers, has become marginalized.

This is what Ferguson writes in an essay entitled “Preaching the Atonement,”

“There is a scandal in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century pulpit: the veiling of the cross...How essential is it...to encourage preaching that is Christ-centered and cross-centered.”

I believe Ferguson has hit the nail on the head. As preachers who are called upon to fulfil a myriad of tasks outside of preaching, we often do not give preaching the time it deserves. And when it comes to choosing what to preach on, we are tempted to think more about what will most interest our congregations, or what we have been reading lately, rather than regularly and systematically returning to the central thrust of the Gospel. Not all biblical truth is equally important, and we need to constantly draw our congregations back to the message of the cross, which is the crowning glory of biblical revelation. We need to remember Paul's ambition, which should burn in our hearts as well, "I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified" (1 Cor 2:2).

When was the last time we preached a series of sermons on the cross of Christ, or spoke in detail about key biblical terms like redemption, reconciliation, atonement, substitution, or even propitiation? These words form the heart of the Gospel. What a difference it might make to our preaching and our churches if we decided to "major on the majors" and gave serious space in our preaching programs to the message of the cross. I confess I often link preaching the cross to a one off preaching event around Easter time. But this project has challenged me to rethink my preaching priorities. In a day when people are more biblically illiterate than ever before, the need to go back to basics and preach the cross is a more pressing need than anything else in our ministries.

I wonder if one of the reasons why Steve Chalke's views have gained momentum is because there has been a move away from preaching the cross in our generation. Could it be that the average Scottish congregation is simply unaware of

the issues surrounding the cross because they rarely hear it from their pulpits?

Recently Dr. Ian Shaw, a lecturer in Church History in Glasgow, was preaching at my church. He has just written a book on penal substitution called *The Divine Substitute* in which he tackles Chalke's views. I asked him in an interview at our service, what led him to write the book.

He told me that he had been asked to write the book several times by his publishers, but had refused. What changed his mind was going to hear the debate in London between Steve Chalke and the Evangelical Alliance. He claimed there were things said about the cross at that public debate that were only being said by liberals 100 years ago. He found the sheer lack of knowledge about the atonement staggering – that's why he felt he had to write the book. If you do nothing else as a result of these sessions together, then please do this – spend serious time reading about the cross, to sharpen yourself, and preaching the cross, to sharpen your congregation. Preaching the atonement is the number one priority in our ministry.

And that includes preaching from the Old Testament as well as the New. One of the key issues that has emerged from the propitiation debate is how much of the doctrine depends on Old Testament teaching about God's holiness and wrath. When the New Testament writers were talking about the cross, they assumed their readers had a firm grasp of Old Testament concepts such as the effects of the Fall in Genesis 3, the Old Testament sacrificial system and the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, the judgements that met those who flouted God's holiness, like Achan in Joshua 7 and King Uzziah in 2 Chronicles, and the "holy, holy, holy" vision of God in Isaiah 6.

Building that Old Testament platform properly into our preaching, if it's not already there, will bring fresh power when we preach the cross in the New Testament. But we cannot simply assume that our congregations today have any real understanding of these issues that are so basic to the Gospel message, especially when they are reading books that contradict those teachings from popular Christian preachers. Propitiation shows us that we cannot grasp something as fundamental as the love of God, and words like grace and mercy, before we have a rich understanding of holiness and wrath. To preach the love of God without having first preached the holiness of God will only lead to more people thinking like Steve Chalke. They will end up with a flimsy, exemplarist view of the atonement, they will think that the notion of propitiation is grotesque. They will have little ultimate understanding of what it means when we say "Christ died for our sins" (1 Cor 15:3), the most basic confession of Christianity.

The problem is of course, like preachers in every age, we wrestle between preaching what people want to hear and what they need to hear. If you took a poll of your congregation and you asked them what they wanted you to preach on, they probably wouldn't reply "please teach us about the holiness code in Leviticus. Please teach me about the sacrificial system." Probably higher on the list would be "teach me how to be a better parent. Teach me how to deal with my teenager." And some would say, "don't teach me at all, let's spend more time in worship."

The prophets in the Old Testament faced a similar dilemma to the one we face. People wanted Jeremiah to preach soothing words when God had given him a message of judgement and exile for Israel, a message Jeremiah found unpalatable at

times, but a message that burned in his heart. Second Timothy 4 warns us that in the Last Days people will gather around them teachers who teach them what their itching ears want to hear – they will not “put up with sound doctrine.” That seems to be how many in the church today are reacting to the unpalatable teaching about the wrath of God and propitiation. They want to throw out these unpalatable doctrines that create such a stigma when we try and present them to unbelievers today.

And yet Paul’s Last Will and Testament to Timothy, who was entrusted with the Gospel, and would carry Paul’s baton into the future, was “Preach the Word.” Preach the uncompromising truth of the Gospel when that Gospel is “in season,” when people greet it with joy, and also when it’s “out of season.” Preach the Word when people don’t have any time for it. Preach the Word in cultures that despise it. Preach the Word when influential teachers around you are preaching something different. Preach the Word when you know it’s going to be greeted with cynicism. Preach the Word when you know it is heading on a collision course with the worldview of your hearers. Preach the Word when men will praise you for it, and when they despise you for it. Preach the Word.

Preaching has always been confrontational and uncomfortable. It exposes men and women in their sin. It cuts right to the heart of a man or woman, as though it were separating their souls from their spirits. You cannot preach a true Gospel in a hostile world, without feeling the heat. But this is what we are called to. We are called to the same task as Noah who told a mocking world that God was going to send a flood. The same task as Moses who sent the stone tablets crashing to the

ground when he saw the idolatry of God's people. The same task as Samuel who called the whole nation to repentance and mourning after they lost the Ark to the Philistines. The same task as Elijah who challenged 450 false prophets to public confrontation. The same task as Jeremiah who ended up in a pit for telling his contemporaries the truth that Jerusalem would come to ruin. The same task as Peter who stood in front of 3000 people at Pentecost and told them they had murdered the Son of God. The same task as Paul when he stood in front of the mocking philosophers of Athens and told them God had appointed the risen Christ to judge the world. In every age preaching takes courage. It demands confrontation. It demands preaching unpopular themes fervently with patience and gentleness.

But being assured all the while that God has packed his Gospel with power. He has promised to break through the barriers of the secular mind and hostile heart, and bring life to those who are dead. So let's make this commitment together today, that from this day on, no matter what the cost, we will preach "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, so help us God." Let us resolve like Paul to know nothing except Jesus Christ and him crucified. Amen.

CHAPTER FIVE

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

A. CONSTRUCTING THE EVALUATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

A group of thirty-three pastors, scholars and lay preachers attended the talks on November 30, 2006 at Deeside Christian Fellowship Church, Aberdeen. The scholars in the audience were a mix of graduate students and New Testament lecturers from Aberdeen University, and the other preachers were based in Aberdeen city. Ideally I felt the talks should be given over at least two separate sessions because of the amount and nature of the content. However, I ultimately decided to give the talks on a single evening because I knew from past experience that it was difficult to get a group of busy pastors to attend on more than one occasion, and I wanted the participants to hear and respond to all three talks as a unit.

In order to assess how the talks had been received, I devised the following questionnaire which I invited all the participants to complete at the end of the seminar (see below).⁹² It was important that the questionnaire was clear, was brief enough to be completed within ten minutes at the end of a long evening yet allowed space to give meaningful feedback that would help me evaluate the main strengths and weaknesses of my talks.

⁹² The questionnaire was printed on A4 paper, the standard size used in Britain, which allowed more space for answers to the open ended questions (13-16) than this sample might suggest

SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE FOR 'PENAL SUBSTITUTION' SEMINAR

Preaching experience

1. How often do you preach? (please circle one)

A. Regularly (at least once-a-month)

B. Now and again

C. I have never preached

For questions 2-10 please indicate the degree to which you agree or disagree with each statement

Strongly agree (1).....(2).....(3).....(4).....(5) Strongly Disagree

2. ____ The talks were well organised and easy to follow

3. ____ The talks held my attention

4. ____ The talks were firmly based on Scripture

5. ____ The talks were relevant to my ministry

6. ____ The talks displayed thorough research

7. ____ The talks were convincing

8. ____ The talks clearly explained 'penal substitution'

9. ____ The talks clearly explained 'propitiation'

10. ____ The talks clearly explained 'atonement theories'

11. ____ I feel that others would be helped by these talks

12. ____ I would attend similar talks in the future

Questions 11-20 allow you to elaborate on the content of the talks

13. What did you find **most helpful** about the talks?

14. What did you find **least helpful** about the talks?

15. Were any mannerisms, words or gestures used that you found **distracting**?

16. How do you plan to **respond** to these talks? If you are a preacher, what difference will they make to your **preaching**?

Circle the number that reflects your opinion of these talks

| | | | | | | | |
|-----|-------------|---|---|---|---|---|-------------|
| 17. | Confusing | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Clear |
| 18. | Shallow | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Substantial |
| 19. | Irrelevant | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Relevant |
| 20. | Dull | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Interesting |
| 21. | Judgemental | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | Gracious |

My overall impression of this evening (please circle one)

Excellent Good Average Poor Waste of Time

B. RATIONALE FOR THE EVALUATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTION ONE. HOW OFTEN DO YOU PREACH?

I imagined that some of those attending the seminar would not be regular preachers. As the talks were aimed specifically at preachers, I decided not to take the views of non preachers into account. It would not be a fair reflection of the talks to take on board the views of those for whom the talks were not intended. I would only include the feedback from those who preached ‘regularly’ or ‘now and again.’

QUESTION 2. THE TALKS WERE WELL ORGANISED AND EASY TO FOLLOW.

I wanted to know if there was anything in the layout of the talks that made understanding difficult. Was there a lack of progression or logic in the talks? Were the handouts clear enough?

QUESTION 3. THE TALKS HELD MY ATTENTION.

I hoped the talks held enough interest that they did not come across as a dry lecture.

QUESTION 4. THE TALKS WERE FIRMLY BASED ON SCRIPTURE.

I was keen to know whether there was enough reference to Scripture in the talks, rather than simply commentary of the opinions of various theologians. The error in the thinking of many preachers regarding penal substitution stems from listening to

theologians and popular preachers instead of listening to the text. If penal substitution cannot be defended from the text, it is not worth considering.

QUESTION 5. THE TALKS WERE RELEVANT TO MY MINISTRY.

I hoped week by week preachers would find the talks relevant to their pulpit ministry, indeed that the evening would inspire them to return to preaching the cross. If this did not happen, the talks would have limited value.

QUESTION 6. THE TALKS DISPLAYED THOROUGH RESEARCH.

I was most anxious about whether the talks displayed thorough research, especially as I consider myself only an amateur scholar, yet the talks relied to some extent on solid scholarship. I was worried that the talks would lose credibility because my reading had not been wide enough. The fact that two of the preachers who attended the event are also New Testament professors at Aberdeen University, one of them a specialist on penal substitution, only intensified the need to ask this question.

QUESTION 7. THE TALKS WERE CONVINCING.

If participants did not accept the doctrine of penal substitution before the talks, would they be more persuaded afterwards? Would those who believed in the doctrine find the talks helpful to cement those convictions?

**QUESTION 8. THE TALKS CLEARLY EXPLAINED 'PENAL
SUBSTITUTION.'**

QUESTION 9. THE TALKS CLEARLY EXPLAINED 'PROPITIATION.'

**QUESTION 10. THE TALKS CLEARLY EXPLAINED 'ATONEMENT
THEORIES.'**

It was important to assess how clearly some of the more technical aspects of the talk came across. I also wanted to ensure that technical terms that were crucial for understanding the talks were well explained. If the participants were not clear about penal substitution, propitiation or the whole section on atonement theories throughout church history, the talks would lose their effectiveness.

**QUESTION 11. I FEEL OTHERS WOULD BE HELPED BY THESE
TALKS.**

Did the participants feel that the subject was sufficiently important, and the content sufficiently well delivered that they would benefit others?

QUESTION 12. I WOULD ATTEND SIMILAR TALKS IN THE FUTURE.

To my knowledge, this is the first seminar of its kind in the city, and I was keen to know if the evening would develop a hunger for future seminars, perhaps on different theological topics that would benefit preachers.

QUESTION 13. WHAT DID YOU FIND MOST HELPFUL ABOUT THE TALKS?

QUESTION 14. WHAT DID YOU FIND LEAST HELPFUL ABOUT THE TALKS?

I wanted to keep the open ended questions as open as possible to allow the participants to say whatever they wished. With scholars, full time preachers, and occasional lay preachers in attendance, I imagined that each would approach the talks from different standpoints, and I wanted to be aware of the whole range of opinion, and what each found most important to mention both positively and negatively.

QUESTION 15. WERE ANY MANNERISMS, WORDS OR GESTURES USED THAT YOU FOUND DISTRACTING?

While I was not preaching, I was still seeking to communicate, and body language is always important in public communication. Was there anything about my mannerisms that distracted people from the content of the talks?

QUESTION 16. HOW DO YOU PLAN TO RESPOND TO THESE TALKS? IF YOU ARE A PREACHER, WHAT DIFFERENCE WILL THESE TALKS MAKE TO YOUR PREACHING?

These talks were aimed at provoking a response. I was not presenting two sides of a theological debate and leaving the participants to decide where they stood. I was aiming to challenge Gospel preachers to recover their confidence in the doctrine of

penal substitution, and return to preaching the cross. If there was appreciation for the talks, but no desire to preach the cross, then the ultimate impact of the talks would fall short of the target.

QUESTION 17. (WERE THE TALKS) CONFUSING...CLEAR?

This was another way of asking were the talks easy to follow, as in question two, so that I could see whether the responses were consistent on a key issue.

QUESTION 18. (WERE THE TALKS) SHALLOW...SUBSTANTIAL?

QUESTION 19. (WERE THE TALKS) IRRELEVANT...RELEVANT?

QUESTION 20. (WERE THE TALKS) DULL...INTERESTING?

These questions went into more detail about the intrinsic interest of the talks. I was concerned whether scholars might find the talks shallower than other preachers who had not read as widely on the issue. Would week-by-week preachers find the talks relevant to their pulpit preaching, or lost in theological jargon? Were the talks engaging or dry? Again these questions repeated the same issues as earlier questions to ensure that the responses were consistent and the feedback was valid.

QUESTION 21. (WERE THE TALKS) JUDGEMENTAL...GRACIOUS?

While the talks involved rebutting the views of well known preachers and authors, I hoped that the presentation would be winsome. I did not want the talks to become a character assassination of well known public Christians, but simply interacting with viewpoints rather than personalities.

QUESTION 22. MY OVERALL IMPRESSION OF THE EVENING.

A final question invites an overall an overall response. Was the evening worth attending, bearing in mind its strengths and weaknesses.

C. RESULTS OF THE EVALUATIVE QUESTIONNAIRE

QUESTION 1. HOW OFTEN DO YOU PREACH?

- A. Regularly (15)
- B. Now and Again (9)
- C. I have never preached (9)

ANALYSIS

The rest of this analysis will only take into account the responses of the twenty-four participants who preach “regularly” or “now and again.”

QUESTION 2. THE TALKS WERE WELL ORGANISED AND EASY TO FOLLOW.

- Strongly Agree (16)
- Agree (8)

ANALYSIS

Clearly the participants felt that the talks were well organized. Several made special mention of how clear the handouts were, and how well structured the talks

were in the open ended questions. I felt myself that there was a logical flow of thought to the talks. It was also helpful to have breaks during the talks to allow people a rest and time to take in a great deal of material, a point also raised by one participant in the open ended questions. I would not want to change the basic flow of thought of these talks.

QUESTION 3. THE TALKS HELD MY ATTENTION.

Strongly Agree (13)

Agree (11)

ANALYSIS

I was pleased with this response, not least because the talks included some quite technical Greek language discussion. The section dealing with the Dodd versus Morris debate cannot be properly explained without some detailed reference to Greek verbs used in the sacrificial system, and explaining the difference between expiation and propitiation involves a similar level of detail. So for all the participants to agree or strongly agree that the talks held their attention was a sign that the seminar held enough intrinsic interest not to bore anyone for too long. Clearly the handouts also helped as the participants always knew where we were going, and if they lost the thread of a technical language debate, they could pick up the flow of thought again quickly.

QUESTION 4. THE TALKS WERE FIRMLY BASED ON SCRIPTURE.

Strongly Agree (13)

Agree (10)

Not Sure (1)

ANALYSIS

Again there was generally good agreement that the talks were solidly rooted in Scripture. One participant, who agreed that the talks were well grounded, added the comment that more Scripture references could have been used, and he wanted to see more detailed exegesis when it came to the New Testament evidence for propitiation. His point is well taken. There is much more exegetical detail that could have been presented about propitiation, but it is impossible to cover everything in a single evening. The aim of the evening was not simply to provide an exegetical defence of the doctrine, but to show how the doctrine is being attacked, to give necessary background on atonement theories that are a bone of contention in the debate, and most of all to encourage preachers to get back to preaching the cross. Because of the broad scope of the talks, it was impossible in the time frame to go into as much exegetical detail as we would have liked.

This did raise the issue of whether the talks should be given in more detail over several sessions. That approach would be more possible if the talks were given as part of a longer conference for preachers. But I felt happy that there was enough Scriptural detail presented on this particular evening in the context of what we were trying to achieve.

QUESTION 5. THE TALKS WERE RELEVANT TO MY MINISTRY.

Strongly Agree (11)

Agree (8)

Not sure (5)

ANALYSIS

I was a little disappointed that five people felt unsure whether the talks were relevant to their ministry. All of these participants are preachers, and I had hoped the relevance of penal substitution for those who preach the Gospel week-by-week was clear. However, the talks did delve into sometimes complex theological argument that some of these preachers would not have been used to. This level of academic discussion, particularly concerning Greek verbs, and debates between scholars, is not usually a necessary part of pastoral work. Some of the questions during the question and answer sessions were asked by academics, and took the discussion in a direction that non academics clearly found unhelpful judging by their comments in the open ended questions. That may have led to doubts about the relevance of the talks.

I also sensed during conversations following the talks that some of the preachers were so committed to the doctrine of penal substitution that they wondered why a seminar on the issue was necessary. It is not that they felt penal substitution was an unnecessary topic for preachers, but they were already so convinced of it, they felt they did not need a deep, at times technical, discussion on it. However, overall, the participants still agreed, most strongly so, that the talks

were relevant for their preaching, and I have no doubt, whatever the weaknesses of the talks, that this subject is among the most relevant for preachers today.

QUESTION 6. THE TALKS DISPLAYED THOROUGH RESEARCH.

Strongly Agree (10)

Agree (11)

Not sure (3)

ANALYSIS

I was pleased with the feedback concerning my research, not least because there were New Testament professors in the audience who are more widely read on these issues than I. One of the participants was Dr. Simon Gathercole, who is considered an expert in the UK on penal substitution, and was chosen by the Evangelical Alliance to debate Steve Chalke at Westminster. I discussed with him the accuracy of my research following the talks. He encouraged me that my research was good, but also directed me to some books from his library that would give me some better background on atonement theories. My aim was to give an overview on atonement theories for preachers with limited background knowledge, and I feel I succeeded in that. However atonement theories from church history are a more debated and complicated issue than my talks may have reflected.

Dr. Gathercole's suggestions for further reading have been invaluable to give me more confidence in presenting atonement theories in the future. He was most encouraging that the talks were both worthwhile and effective for preachers

from a scholarly standpoint. Interestingly he told me that, as a scholar, he found the clarity, conviction and passion of the talks most refreshing, when compared with the often muddled waters of scholarly debate that he has to deal with as an evangelical in secular academia.

QUESTION 7. THE TALKS WERE CONVINCING.

Strongly Agree (10)

Agree (11)

Not sure (3)

ANALYSIS

Again there was good agreement that the talks were convincing. This was an important question because the aim of the talks was to convince evangelicals about the truth of penal substitution and its centrality to the Gospel. Some in the audience clearly did not accept penal substitution prior to the evening, so to have strong agreement that the talks were convincing, and for only three participants to be unsure, was a pleasing outcome. There were quite a high number who agreed, rather than strongly agreed. While I would not want to draw too many conclusions from that response, there were clearly areas to develop in the talks, and other responses point particularly to the atonement theory section as one that needs more detailed reading on my part.

If I could give the talks over several different sessions, I would also spend more time in detailed exegesis of the Scriptures that defend the doctrine of

propitiation. For example, one participant, who was a scholar, commented that more work needs to be done to show that propitiation is clearly present in the “mercy seat” image of Romans 3:25. His point is well taken, and encourages me to do further research.

QUESTION 8. THE TALKS CLEARLY EXPLAINED 'PENAL SUBSTITUTION.'

Strongly Agree (9)

Agree (14)

Not sure (1)

ANALYSIS

Again the response to this question highlighted the fact that I could have gone into more exegetical detail, pointing to more Bible references for penal substitution than time allowed. That is reflected in the fact that a large number agreed rather than strongly agreed. I feel certain that the majority went away clear about a basic definition of penal substitution, but some may have felt the need for more concrete biblical evidence. If more time was available, more work could easily be done in this area.

QUESTION 9. THE TALKS CLEARLY EXPLAINED 'PROPITIATION.'

Strongly Agree (13)

Agree (10)

Not sure (1)

ANALYSIS

More participants felt strongly that they understood propitiation than felt they understood penal substitution. That is probably because the talks were more focussed on showing biblical evidence for propitiation, than the broader doctrine of penal substitution. The whole Dodd versus Morris debate, which occupied significant time in the talks, focused exclusively on propitiation. That was the intention because I felt that the most controversial and dangerous statements that Chalke made in his book revolved around doubting the doctrine of the retributive wrath of God, and the need for that wrath to be appeased at the cross. God's anger at human sin and the resultant need for propitiation at the cross was the key theological issue that I felt preachers dare not lose sight of in their Gospel preaching. The fact that a high number agreed, rather than strongly agreed, is probably because the arguments concerning propitiation are detailed and complex. However, it was clear that propitiation had been explained effectively.

QUESTION 10. THE TALKS CLEARLY EXPLAINED 'ATONEMENT THEORIES.'

Strongly Agree (4)

Agree (15)

Not sure (4)

Disagree (1)

ANALYSIS

It is clear from these responses, later open ended answers, and my own perception, that the atonement theory section was the weakest part of the talks. That does not mean this section was unnecessary, as most still agreed that atonement theories were clearly explained. But it is clear I have more reading to do in this complex area. The history of atonement theories is more contentious than I realized. I relied too much in my research on Systematic Theology texts that give a basic overview of atonement theories, when there are more contemporary books available specifically on the subject that I need to research in greater depth.

Atonement theories remain an important subject to discuss as so many of the opponents of penal substitution feel the doctrine was only formed by the fifteenth century reformers or even more recently, and lacks historical credibility. A book yet to be published, that I have access to currently, shows that to be a false position⁹³. There is significant evidence for penal substitution as a widely held belief in the early church from the likes of Justin Martyr, Athanasius, Gregory the Great and Augustine, and such evidence would greatly enrich these talks.

QUESTION 11. I FEEL THAT OTHERS WOULD BE HELPED BY THESE TALKS.

Strongly Agree (13)

Agree (10)

⁹³ A key book for assessing the history of atonement theories as well as the whole penal substitution debate is Steve Jeffrey, Mike Ovey and Andrew Sachs, *Pierced for our Transgressions* (Leicester: IVP, 2007). It promises to be the most up-to-date, thorough defense of penal substitution available, interacting thoroughly with many modern objections to the doctrine. See a detailed description of the book in my Focused Literature Review.

Not sure (1)

ANALYSIS

There was strong agreement from most participants that there was enough value in these talks to make them useful for others to hear. This gives me confidence that, if I were invited to give these talks in a wider forum in the future, I have good enough basic material, with some minor adjustments, to accept the invitation. If these talks are accessible to both high level scholars, and less well read lay preachers, then they should be accessible to a wide audience.

QUESTION 12. I WOULD ATTEND SIMILAR TALKS IN THE FUTURE

Strongly Agree (15)

Agree (8)

Not sure (1)

ANALYSIS

It seemed clear that the whole idea of a seminar on a theological issue that affects preachers touched a cord with the participants. Clearly nothing about the, at times, technical discussion put the participants off. It is one of the weaknesses of the church in the UK that very little theological reflection is conducted among preachers in this kind of format. Perhaps this is what has lead to the confusion surrounding Chalke's book. It highlights the need for evangelical preachers to encourage each other in sound doctrine so they can be clearer about false teaching

when it appears in the public forum. I would like to conduct similar seminars in the future, and perhaps strengthen links between the theological knowledge of the academy in Aberdeen, and the day to day needs of the pastor.

QUESTION 13. WHAT DID YOU FIND MOST HELPFUL ABOUT THE TALKS?

Reminder that penal substitution is the heart of the Gospel (9)

Talks were clearly set out with excellent handouts (6)

It was helpful to listen to other viewpoints (4)

Clarity and passion of presentation (3)

Historical discussion was helpful and informative (2)

To be informed about current erroneous teaching (2)

Reminder that Father and Son acted together in unison (1)

Preaching is where the battle is won or lost (1)

ANALYSIS

Clearly most the participants felt that penal substitution was an important subject to talk about, and many felt that the evening renewed their confidence in the doctrine. That was the aim of the seminar, so the strength of this response was pleasing. I was surprised how many mentioned the handouts and clarity of the presentation. It is so easy to focus on the complexity of ideas that you forget how important clear explanations are. This response, added to the sense that the presentations were passionate, made me feel I delivered the talks as well as I could.

While the Question and Answer time was not a complete success, several were still pleased to hear other viewpoints. It was good that those who were against penal substitution felt they had opportunity to air their views. Feeling informed about erroneous teaching was another theme of these responses. Very few preachers in the UK feel informed about theological debate, so to provide some information, in an accessible format, was helpful.

QUESTION 14. WHAT DID YOU FIND LEAST HELPFUL ABOUT THE TALKS?

Some of the questions in the Q & A were unhelpful (7)

A lot to cover in a short time (3)

Explanation of atonement theories was not clear (2)

Not enough exegetical evidence for penal substitution (2)

I didn't hear all that was being discussion (during Q&A) (2)

Nothing unhelpful (2)

Some points were made too quickly (1)

Unsympathetic representation of other views (1)

ANALYSIS

It is clear that the biggest problem participants had with the evening was the Question and Answer section. Unfortunately, this allowed the academics who were present to take the discussion into very technical areas of research and study. At one stage we were debating the difference between substitution and penal substitution, and how exactly we understood N.T. Wright's views on the subject.

While those times were helpful for the academics, many of the pastors found the discussion frustrating and at times irrelevant.

I had not intended for the Question and Answer time to have those repercussions. The aim was to provide a break from continuous lecturing, and to allow preachers to discuss how to approach preaching penal substitution. The problem came as a result of the two different audiences I was addressing, and I would need to exercise more control of the discussion in the future, though I still feel an ‘open time’ for questions and answers can be helpful.

The other main bone of contention was trying to fit so much material into a short space of time. Ideally these talks could have been given over at least two evenings. I knew this in advance, but, practically speaking, it is difficult to get a large group of pastors together for more than a single evening. The material, because of its technical nature, was not easy to condense, and when it came to the final talk, discussing how to preach penal substitution, it was clear we were running short of time. Attention spans are also limited at that time of the night. The shortage of time did not ruin the evening, but clearly the talks would be more effective over two sessions rather than one, and indeed that would allow for more exegetical detail, rather than trying to condense the talks any further. Clearly the need both to make the atonement theory section clearer and to provide fuller exegetical evidence for penal substitution, points to more rather than less content in the talks.

The comment that I was unsympathetic towards unorthodox viewpoints would be more concerning if it came from more than one participant. Perhaps

defending the orthodox view as strongly as I did, led to that impression. However later responses make me feel that my presentation was not completely lacking in grace. Penal substitution is, and ought to be, a passionate subject for evangelicals, and at times calls it for strong rebuttals of other viewpoints without entering into an unhelpful character assassination.

**QUESTION 15. WERE ANY MANNERISMS, WORDS OR GESTURES
USED THAT YOU FOUND DISTRACTING?**

No (17)

Too much walking around during presentation (3)

Too quiet to hear at times (1)

ANALYSIS

Clearly the majority of participants did not feel any particular concern in this area. The point that I walked around too much during the presentation is well taken. This is due mostly to nervousness, but it is good to be aware that nervous movement can be off-putting. The reference to inaudibility, I believe, came mostly from the Question and Answer session where a lack of microphones made quietly spoken questioners hard to hear for some. All in all, it seems there were no major mannerisms that distracted from the content of the evening.

**QUESTION 16. HOW DO YOU PLAN TO RESPOND TO THESE TALKS?
IF YOU ARE A PREACHER, WHAT DIFFERENCE WILL THEY MAKE
TO YOUR PREACHING?**

Desire to preach and research the cross more (15)

The need to be passionate, sure of what I believe, sticking to the Word (1)

Challenged to consider more deeply the many metaphors for the cross (1)

Desire to preach more doctrine (1)

Not sure how to respond, but know it will have implications for my preaching (1)

Praise God and preach with the passion and clarity God gives (1)

Desire to teach children the basics of penal substitution (1)

Constantly review my preaching programme so that cross is central (1)

ANALYSIS

I was especially pleased with the responses to this vital question. The aim of the talks was to encourage evangelical preachers to preach penal substitution as the heart of the Gospel. If the majority left the talks with the desire to preach and research the cross more thoroughly, then the goal has been achieved. It seems that even among the academics who were sceptical about penal substitution, some desired to research it more deeply, and saw the importance of raising the issue.

The need for clarity in what we believe is also interesting as many preachers do not know what to make of the penal substitution debate. To be unsure of what we are to preach in the most crucial area of evangelical proclamation is worrying, and so the desire that these responses showed to get back to the Word is pleasing.

The comment about teaching penal substitution to children, which came up in the Question and Answer session, was also encouraging. Preachers can overcomplicate a theme that ultimately boils down to the simple reality, “Christ died for our sins” (1 Cor 15:3). A child can, and should be encouraged to grasp this from an early age.

I wished more had talked about reviewing their preaching programmes. Often evangelical preachers in the UK believe in penal substitution, but are dragged into preaching more inviting topics because their congregations crave relevance. Perhaps I need to emphasize at the end of these talks that we need to analyze the time we give to preaching the cross, so that the cross becomes the passion of the church again.

QUESTION 17. (WERE THE TALKS) CONFUSING...CLEAR?

Very clear (15)

Quite clear (9)

ANALYSIS

These results back up earlier responses and show that the talks are both logically coherent, and are backed up by well organised handouts. Any confusion over atonement theories or evidence for penal substitution did not affect the overall clarity of the presentation.

QUESTION 18. (WERE THE TALKS) SHALLOW...SUBSTANTIAL?

Very substantial (11)

Quite substantial (11)

In between (2)

ANALYSIS

Clearly no participants felt that the talks were shallow. The thirteen participants who felt unable to call the talks “very substantial”, were probably referring to the need for more detail in the atonement theories section and exegetical evidence for penal substitution. How an academic would view the depth of the seminar compared to a regular preacher is bound to vary depending on expectation, but sufficient numbers felt the content was substantial enough not to warrant more changes than we have already discussed.

QUESTION 19. (WERE THE TALKS) RELEVANT...IRRELEVANT?

Very relevant (16)

Quite relevant (8)

ANALYSIS

Clearly penal substitution was an important issue for all of these preachers. Even if some found the talks too academic in parts, all clearly felt the evening contributed to their week to week ministry in a significant way. Even to be informed of

disagreements within a crucial area of evangelical belief, regardless of where one stands on the issue, has to be relevant to what and how we preach.

QUESTION 20. (WERE THE TALKS) DULL...INTERESTING?

Very interesting (12)

Quite interesting (12)

ANALYSIS

This result confirmed earlier findings that, despite the academic nature of the talks, they were still presented in an interesting way. Several commented on their feedback forms that they enjoyed the passion behind the presentation, and perhaps that is what kept the evening from feeling like a dry lecture.

I did feel at times that I was preaching to the participants, exhorting them to defend the Gospel, and perhaps the passion gave the talks an intensity that an academic lecture, giving both sides of an argument objectively, may not have done. It is difficult not to speak passionately about this subject, and I would find it hard to present the talks in a context where a passionate defence of penal substitution, and a warning against false teaching, was not appropriate. Having told the participants in advance what to expect, I feel I did not deceive them in presenting a one-sided case.

QUESTION 21. (WERE THE TALKS) JUDGMENTAL...GRACIOUS?

Very gracious (14)

Quite gracious (9)

Quite judgmental (1)

ANALYSIS

I was particularly interested in the responses to this question, because of my concern that the talks be perceived as a personality assault on Steve Chalke. The participants were told at the beginning that I wanted to interact vigorously with Chalke's views, without attacking him as a person. It seems that goal was largely achieved, with the exception of one participant, who was most likely an academic, and did not agree with penal substitution. While I was quite passionate in refuting Steve Chalke's ideas, I feel content from these responses that I did not make any personal attacks, but it is still an important reminder to me that grace needs to be exercised, no matter how emotive the subject.

QUESTION 22. MY OVERALL IMPRESSION OF THE EVENING.

Excellent (16)

Good (8)

ANALYSIS

I was delighted that one of the strongest responses in the questionnaire was for an overall impression of the evening. It is clear that there were elements of the talks

that could have been done better, but for two-thirds of the participants to feel that the evening was excellent, and the other third to assess it as good, is most encouraging. At the time, I did not feel that the evening was excellent, mostly because I was disappointed by how academic the Question and Answer session had become. However this formed only a small part of the evening, and it is clear that the participants were challenged, informed and found it worthwhile, despite their own busy ministries, to be there.

D. OVERALL EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

When I first had the idea to research current controversies surrounding the orthodox evangelical doctrine of penal substitution, I knew this was an important issue.

Having concluded the project, I now feel this is the most important issue to face evangelicals in the UK for many years. Dr. Ian Shaw, an evangelical professor of church history in Glasgow, told me that he had written a book on the subject because he heard statements being made about the atonement by professing evangelicals that were only being made by liberals a century ago. I share much of his dismay at the questioning of a doctrine which has stood at the centre of evangelicalism for centuries.

It is not the fact that penal substitution has such a firm historical pedigree within evangelicalism that makes it so important. Every generation of believers has to honestly test even the most widely held evangelical doctrines against the testimony of Scripture. Penal substitution is such a vital doctrine because it stands at the heart of Paul's creed in 1 Corinthians 15:3, a creed which is clearly Paul's

summary of the Gospel, “Christ died for our sins”. Without the doctrine of penal substitution, there is no adequate answer to such fundamental questions as “how does God deal with sin? How can sinners be made right with God? How do we define God’s love demonstrated on the cross? How does God remain just and still justify sinful men and women? How does God deal with his own righteous wrath against human sin?”

Evangelical unity is of course crucial, and the moment one attacks the views of a publicly renowned confessing evangelical such as Steve Chalke, one runs the risk of schism. Unity has never been far from my mind as I have researched and given talks on penal substitution. However, it is because of evangelical unity that such talks are necessary. A unity without agreement over penal substitution is not evangelical. The church in the UK needs to seriously consider whether those who deny the doctrine of penal substitution can be considered evangelical in any meaningful sense. If the title evangelical is wide enough to include those who have an exemplarist view of the atonement, and are at best unclear about how the cross deals with human sin, then the title is too wide to be of much value.

The evangelical fraternity is wide enough to embrace charismatic and conservative differences and a wide range of church government and practice. But it surely cannot allow for wide divergence over the kernel of the Gospel – Christ’s sin bearing act on the cross. As Paul himself asserts, our preaching of the cross is a matter of life and death, heaven and hell, to our hearers. The cross as an answer to sin is the heartbeat of evangelicalism, and all unity must be built on that foundation. Without a clear conviction about how the cross deals with sin, it is difficult to lead

an unbeliever to the conversion experience that has separated evangelicalism from other sects and denominations. If conversion is no longer based on a deep awareness of personal sin and guilt before a holy God, generated by the Holy Spirit, leading to a realization that God in his mercy has dealt with that problem in Christ's substitutionary sacrifice, then it is difficult to understand what conversion is, and evangelicalism loses its true identity.

With the seriousness of this issue for the future of the Gospel in the UK, calling evangelical preachers to proclaim penal substitution seems to be the highest priority. It is week by week preaching in churches across the nation that is going to win the hearts and minds of God's people. Such hearts and minds are rarely touched by the technical complexities of academic scholarship, regardless of how thorough or orthodox that scholarship is. That is why I continue to be persuaded that the best way this battle can be won is for a preacher to talk to preachers about this issue.

Throughout the project I have felt my own limitations in researching a very complex scholarly debate. I would not be best placed to defend the notion of penal substitution among students in a university. But I still believe that the best person to convince preachers of the importance and centrality of penal substitution, is a fellow preacher. What we lack in scholarly skills, we make up for in clarity and the day to day experience of leading people towards true, Spirit empowered conversion.

No one understands the demands and constraints of preaching like a fellow preacher. So while I still feel uneasy as an amateur theologian, giving talks that

demand scholarly awareness, I feel that my experience in preaching is a vital component in convincing other preachers about penal substitution. The challenge for me now is to read more widely in the areas of clear weakness that the feedback questionnaire showed up, especially atonement theories, so that these talks can be a sharper tool in the future.

APPENDIX ONE

INTERVIEW WITH REV. DR. LIAM GOLIGHER

The Rev. Dr. Liam Goligher is Senior Minister of Duke Street Church, Richmond and is a conference speaker both in the UK and USA. Liam is author of *The Jesus Gospel: Rediscovering the Lost Message*, a book written in response to the controversy surrounding Steve Chalke's *The Lost Message of Jesus*. This interview took place over email on January 10, 2007.

1. What made you write the book *The Jesus Gospel: Rediscovering the Lost Message*? How has the book been received by evangelicals in London?

Going back to my late teens and my application for the ministry then, it was this doctrine that I had to first defend. I remember being ridiculed at the Ministerial Recognition Committee of a major denomination because I had stated this in my personal statement of faith. In private conversations with Christian leaders over the years I had been told how many of them had moved from this doctrine. I also found that among those who notionally at least appeared to hold it, there had been an increasing reluctance to preach it. Somehow talking merely about God's love shown on the cross seemed to be enough. When Steve's (Chalke) book came out it was a wake up call to evangelicals.

I found myself being increasingly frustrated that nothing clear was being said or quoted from the mainstream of evangelical life in the UK. It was one of those moments where you look around and say, "someone should be saying something about this." I think I actually put it like that in a conversation with one

or two friends at Keswick. One of them, Alistair Begg, looked at me and he said, “surely it’s up to our generation, the buck stops here.” I took it as a rebuke and a challenge and decided I had to preach on the theme in my church (and through the radio ministry we have) and to move the material into written form.

When news that I was writing this book came out, I was warned by a leading figure in the Evangelical Alliance about the implications for myself and my ministry if I stirred the matter up again. Of course the matters raised by the penal substitution debate had not gone away. The Evangelical Left were continuing to exert an influence upon the minds and hearts of a whole generation of youth workers and young people through major Christian events and publications. The same leader wrote an article in which he criticised the “conservatives” (surely a loaded term in any case) of being critical and compromising the unity of evangelicalism. But I ask ‘who started this?’ Surely it is those who have departed from historic evangelical teaching (something confirmed by the EA and others). In some cases the people who now deny it built their ministries and reputations while still believing and preaching penal substitution as part of the gospel. They have moved away from historic confessional evangelicalism.

2. The book traces the whole story of redemption in several different movements. Why did you choose to set it out that way?

The format was already in my head before I started. I had wanted to write about ‘The Drama of Redemption,’ showing how all the ingredients of our redemption

are introduced and are present with growing clarity as the Bible unfolds. There is no doubt a progression in revelation but there is also consistency in revelation.

Because the material was first preached I thought it important not simply to approach the subject as a point of systematic theology. I am convinced of the need for systematic theology and am not as afraid of that discipline as some seem to be today, but it is biblical theology that lays the foundations for systematic theology.

We take a theme and see how it develops throughout the course of revelation (biblical theology) and then draw out the conclusions (systematic theology).

I found it helpful for me to see that the basic message of God's holiness, justice, wrath, love and mercy are to be found unfolded through all the Scriptures.

If you look carefully you will find that I have a number of targets in the book, Open Theists being one, along with the revisionists on the atonement and those who are reworking the Reformation perspective on justification.

3. Why do you think the doctrine of penal substitution is so important for Gospel preachers today?

The doctrine of penal substitution lies at the heart of the gospel. You cannot read Romans or 2 Corinthians without realising that. The death of Christ has to do with sin and its consequences or it is nothing. I think that alongside the imputed righteousness of Christ, it is a most vital doctrine for the believer's health and enjoyment as well as the only explanation the Bible gives as to why the death and resurrection of Christ secures my salvation. More than anything else it is penal substitution that answers the question "why did Jesus have to die?"

4. What advice would you give to fellow preachers who feel bewildered by the controversies surrounding penal substitution today? How do you ensure in your preaching programme that you keep the preaching of the cross central to your weekly pulpit ministry?

I remember reading in the biography of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones that in his early ministry he tended to preach on the difference Jesus makes to our lives, in other words “new life in Christ,” that is of course an essential biblical theme. But he came to see that the core of Christian proclamation has to be “Christ Crucified” or else we lose it altogether. I think my overview of biblical teaching shows that you cannot go anywhere in scripture and be very far from the proclamation of Christ’s death for our sins.

In terms of preaching I think preachers should seek to regularly preach the core gospel even to Christians. There is a sense in which we should never get beyond the gospel. The grace of God in Christ should motivate our service, warm our heart, uplift our worship and inspire our minds. Through pulpit prayers, in evangelistic materials (something like *Christianity Explored* for example), by regular preaching and in the gospel sacraments (baptism and the Supper) we have opportunities to keep before our people the absolute centrality of the cross.

5. What other books would you recommend for preachers to get a firm grasp of the issues surrounding penal substitution?

I commend the work of Leon Morris (*the Apostolic Preaching of the Cross*, and *The Cross in the New Testament*); John Murray (*Redemption: Accomplished and Applied*); John Stott (*The Cross of Christ*); H. E. Guillebaud (*Why the Cross?*); Hill and James (*The Glory of the Atonement*); Steve Jeffery; Mike Ovey and Andrew Sach, (*Pierced for our Transgressions*).

APPENDIX TWO

INTERVIEW WITH DR. SIMON GATHERCOLE

Dr. Simon J. Gathercole is Professor of New Testament at the University of Aberdeen. He is considered an expert on the doctrine of penal substitution and was chosen by the Evangelical Alliance to debate Steve Chalke at Westminster. This interview took place over email on January 12, 2007.

1. How did you get involved in the debate between the Evangelical Alliance and Steve Chalke? Why did you want to get involved?

I didn't particularly want to get involved! I was asked to take part in it by David Hilborn (former theological advisor to the EA), who wanted an academic response to some of the book's conclusions. Although I'm not a person who thrives on conflict, I did think that it was necessary to provide some answers to some of the more wrong-headed points in the book.

I was particularly disturbed by two factors. First, I felt the book was very one-sided in its treatment of this-worldly realities over against eternal realities. My concern here was not only the usual conservative response - that this downplays judgement and wrath. It also devalues people's hope of heaven. Second, the focus of the debate was intended to be penal substitution, and I was concerned that this was missing in Chalke's account of Jesus; in response I focused on Mark 10.45, and - rather disturbingly - it emerged in subsequent discussion that Chalke thought that the cry of dereliction was not really to be taken as the Father's abandonment of the Son in judgment.

2. Among those who claim to be evangelical scholars, are there many who deny penal substitution? To what extent is the doctrine of penal substitution still considered an orthodox evangelical belief?

It's very difficult to put a figure on this. There are many who would call themselves evangelical and deny penal substitution, and many who would call themselves evangelicals but affirm it. It tends to be regarded as an orthodox evangelical belief by those who believe it - but also by most liberals, I would say.

3. Where do you see the penal substitution debate going from here?

I suppose I have various hopes and fears. One hope is that it will lead to renewed attempts to examine the exegetical basis of penal substitution. Unfortunately, the debate has often merely revolved around name-calling on both sides – “cosmic child abuse” or “abandonment of Christian tradition.” The latter is true, but a Christian doctrine is worthless if it’s not Scriptural.

4. Why do you feel the doctrine of penal substitution is so important for evangelicals to hold onto?

I think it is important firstly because it's the Gospel, and if you don't believe penal substitution you're not really preaching the Gospel. So there's a missiological dimension there - it's about how the lost are saved. Secondly it's crucial because Christians need the doctrine to have assurance. If Jesus hasn't taken the punishment in our place, then there *is* condemnation (contra Rom. 8.1).

5. What advice would you give to preachers in light of the penal substitution debate? What books would you recommend to help preachers gain a firm grasp of the issues?

I would encourage preachers to remember the two points above, and to make a habit of meditating on 1 Cor. 15:1-11 as a central passage about ministry, about the content of Christian preaching. It's not just unbelievers who need to hear the Gospel, but as Paul makes clear in 15.1, it's believers as well. In terms of literature, I'd recommend D. Peterson, ed. *Where Wrath and Mercy Meet: Proclaiming the Atonement Today* (Carlisle, 2001) and R. Letham, *The Work of Christ* (Leicester, 1993). There is an excellent book coming out soon: Steve Jeffery, Michael Ovey, Andrew Sach, *Pierced for our Transgressions* (Leicester, 2007) which is a very thorough treatment of both exegetical and theological issues.

APPENDIX THREE

INTERVIEW WITH DR. IAN SHAW

Dr. Ian J. Shaw is Postgraduate Studies Leader and Lecturer in the History of Christianity at the International Christian College in Glasgow, a training school for evangelical ministers. He is co-author with Brian Edwards, of the book *The Divine Substitute*, which was written in response to Steve Chalke. The book traces the history of evangelical thought regarding penal substitution, and offers clear guidelines for preachers about how to present the orthodox doctrine in a winsome way today. This interview took place over email on January 31, 2007.

1. What led to the writing of the book?

A combination of circumstances led to my writing *The Divine Substitute: The Atonement in the Bible and Church History*. Primarily it was a request from the publisher, DayOne, to help produce an academically informed approach to the question, written in a style accessible to the ‘average’ non-academic reader. I had been aware for some time of growing questions being posed over traditional evangelical teaching about penal substitutionary atonement, which achieved significant attention with the publication of Steve Chalke and Alan Mann’s book, *The Lost Message of Jesus*. The radical rejection of traditional teaching on the atonement found in this work from a leading British evangelical, involved in the Oasis Trust, the Evangelical Alliance, and the Spring Harvest movement, crystallised the seriousness of the issue. A subsequent symposium was convened by the Evangelical Alliance in July 2005, which I attended. I found myself

disappointed by the lack of historical awareness amongst many participants, as to how evangelicals have traditionally viewed the atonement, and indeed the deep roots of understandings of the atonement as both penal and substitutionary that are found throughout the history of the church. This convinced me of the need to accept the invitation from the publisher.

2. Why do you feel it is important for preachers to know the history of evangelical thought in this area?

John Wesley once claimed that nothing in Christian teaching “is of greater importance than the doctrine of the atonement.”⁹⁴ The book I wrote is based on the conviction that Wesley was right. There is a profound need for evangelical preachers to base their proclamation of the gospel upon a clear understanding of the atonement, as the fine example of Wesley, and many others, demonstrates. The book begins with a statement of the biblical doctrine of the atonement followed by a survey of how this has been presented in Christian tradition from the early church to the present day. Viewing the issue of Christ bearing the punishment for sin in the place of sinners, through the lens of Christian history, helps us to appreciate why the church has come to understand the teaching of the Bible in a certain way, and why some approaches have been rejected in the past, and others retained. It raises fundamental questions about new developments – why has this not been adopted by the Christian church before? Many modern views of the atonement are a reworking of long rejected ideas, simply presented in contemporary packaging, and preachers need to be aware of this.

⁹⁴ . J. Wesley, *Letters of John Wesley*, ed. J. Telford, Vol. 6 (London, Epworth, 1931), 297.

Contemporary preachers, in their role as community theologians for their local churches, should be not only biblically literate about these issues, but also historically literate. This is why the historical section of the book is important. Hopefully it will encourage further study, reflection, and a challenge to believe — and proclaim — these truths with renewed courage and faithfulness.

3. What would be the repercussion for Gospel preaching today if we lost confidence in the doctrine of penal substitution?

The richness of the way in which the Bible refers to the work of Christ upon the Cross has been reflected in the works of leading theologians and preachers throughout the history of the church. However, at the heart of Biblical teaching about the atonement is the substitutionary death of Jesus Christ, bearing the just penalty for sins. This profound truth draws together all other ways of speaking about the atonement; it is the operative principle that lies behind them. What the book shows is that this teaching on the penal and substitutionary death of Christ is not simply the product of one particular time or context. Although distinctive contributions have been made in certain eras, it is a theme that has been taught at every period in the history of the church.

Losing this central theme would cast questions over so many other aspects of the work of Christ. Indeed the whole biblical revelation of the Fall of mankind into sin, its consequences, and God's plan of salvation, would lose its focus. The penal and substitutionary understanding of the atonement demonstrates how serious sin is, how it is so appalling to a holy and just God. Sin must be punished,

otherwise God would not be true to his just character. But the penal and substitutionary understanding also demonstrates the amazing grace of God, by himself making atonement through the substitutionary work of the Saviour who is both fully God and fully Man. The death of Christ was vicarious, penal, and propitiatory – it deals with the just punishment of a holy God against sin. It is also the supreme demonstration of the love of God.

Variations from this traditional perspective raise profound questions. If the death of Christ was not penal and substitutionary, why was the cross necessary at all? Why did the Saviour endure such appalling suffering, why Gethsemane, and the Cry of Dereliction, if his death was something less than a penal substitutionary death? How can God be just and holy, and forgive sins without the just and full punishment of that sin being fully paid?

Rejection of the penal and substitutionary understanding of the atonement would also bring a profound shift in evangelicalism. Indeed, until comparatively recently, across the theological and ecclesiological spectrum, rejection of this teaching has been seen as erroneous and dangerous, and has often been associated with error in other areas – such as holding theologically liberal views of the Trinity or Scripture. Contemporary Christians should be not only biblically literate about these issues, but also historically literate. To Luther this was “the chief doctrine of the Christian faith,” to John Wesley “the inmost mystery of the Christian faith,” and to C.H. Spurgeon “the first, the grandest, the highest, the most essential truth.” Martyn Lloyd-Jones believed it was “absolutely crucial for a true understanding of Christian doctrine and the way of salvation,” and to J.I.

Packer it was the “distinguishing mark of the worldwide evangelical fraternity.”

Alister McGrath has called Packer’s defence of penal substitution “classic evangelical orthodoxy.”⁹⁵ The belief that the atoning death of Christ was a work of penal substitution remains the ‘normal’ position of evangelicalism. If confidence in this is lost, evangelicalism will have fundamentally changed, and have placed itself in a position of historical discontinuity with leading evangelicals in the recent and more distant past.

4. What advice would you give to preachers who feel bewildered by the controversies surrounding the penal substitution debate?

The key issue for preachers is whether we are to be faithful to the revelation of scripture, or whether, in an attempt to adapt their message to what many in the modern West want to hear, we set aside or substantially modify what scripture teaches, and what the Church has traditionally taught. In days when immediacy is everything, and when instant solutions are demanded, there is a great danger that in an effort to appear contemporary, Christians in the present generation will also lose sight of the rich heritage of church teaching in this area. Viewing penal substitution as just one option amongst a range of ways of thinking of the atonement, which could be either accepted or not, was decisively rejected by

⁹⁵ A. McGrath. *To Know and Serve God: A Life of James I. Packer* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1997), 209.

leaders such as John Wesley. He asserted that to deny this truth was to “deny the Lord that bought them.”⁹⁶

The penal substitutionary death of Christ is a topic of great mystery, and a matter for profound worship. Statements of the atonement should never become narrowly analytical, or formulaic, but should always become an expression of faith, and a foundation for a life of devotion and self-sacrifice. Other ways of speaking of the cross are important, but ultimately they only make sense when the substitutionary death of Christ stands at the core.

There is a need for evangelical preachers and theologians to defend these truths. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones explained, “What a salvation! Is it surprising that the enemy with all his ingenuity and malignity masses his attack upon this, and would rob these glorious terms of their real and profound meaning.”⁹⁷ The modern Western mind reacts negatively to the concepts of sin and the wrath of God. But in this, perhaps the modern, or post-modern, mind is not so modern after all, for in the second century Marcion only wanted to speak of a God of love, and Greek philosophers decided that wrath was a notion unworthy of being attributed to a deity. Yet the gospel writers did not seek to accommodate their message to account for what was considered unpalatable for their age – whether it was the offence of the cursed cross to Jews, or a holy and sin-judging God to Greeks, nor should evangelical preachers today.

⁹⁶ J. Wesley. *Letters of John Wesley*, Vol. III. Epworth. London 1931. p 109. Letter to Dr John Robertson, 24 September 1753.

⁹⁷ M. Lloyd-Jones. *Romans: An Exposition of Chapters 3.20-4.25: Atonement and Justification*. Banner of Truth. Edinburgh 1970. p 94.

I am of the opinion that there are significant lessons to be learned from the controversy over penal substitution. History also shows that evangelical Christians have not always expressed the truth of the atonement with sufficient care. I would urge preachers to reflect carefully on what they communicate. It is important always to stress that the initiative in the atonement lies with God, who in love planned the way of salvation. We must not forget to affirm, “God so loved the world that...”

The cross must also be preached in a Trinitarian way, recognising always the eternal harmony between the persons of the Godhead. At times the Father has been portrayed as a reluctant player in the act of forgiveness. According to Sinclair Ferguson, if any hint is given that the Father is the hostile party in the work of the atonement, it will “poison the Christian’s sense of pardon, stability and joy, which are grounded in the knowledge that Christ is truly and fully the revelation of the Father.”⁹⁸ The impression of any form of disjunction between the Father and the Son must be strictly avoided: it must not be implied that the Father was unwilling to suffer, nor that Christ was a victim. Nor should he be presented as dying to placate or pacify a Father who is filled with vengeance which was only averted at the last moment by the interception of the Son. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were at one in their loving eternal plan and purpose, and in its outworking upon the cross. All that the Son did, he did voluntarily and in love.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ S. Ferguson, “Preaching the Atonement,” in eds. C.E. Hill and F.A. James III, *The Glory of the Atonement*, IVP. Downers Grove. Illinois 2004. p 431.

⁹⁹ In today’s culture, where we have become all too tragically aware of the reality of violent cruelty against children, the language of God striking his Son with his rod in anger, found in some

Preachers should remember that the wrath of God is a clear biblical teaching, but one which needs to be spoken of with care. This is not the uncontrolled rage of the tyrant, nor the anger of the ogre. God's wrath is pure and undefiled. Sin is hateful to God, it is an offence to his holy presence, and because God is just, sin cannot simply be forgiven, the righteous penalty against it must be served. The wrath of God is the outworking of his holiness and justice against sin. But the cross is the supreme demonstration of the love of God – it is the place where wrath and mercy meet. As the famous Free Kirk theologian John 'Rabbi' Duncan explained it to his students: "It was *damnation*: and he took it *lovingly*."¹⁰⁰ The justice and mercy of God should not be set in opposition to each other, one aspect of his character did not prevail over another, but all his attributes were, and remain, in eternal harmony.

Preachers need to speak of the suffering of the cross in all its dimensions, not simply recount the physical sufferings of Christ, as if that were all there is to say about his death. The mental and spiritual tortures of the holy, sinless, Son of God bearing sin and guilt and its punishment were as great, if not greater, than the physical pain – as Gethsemane shows. Linked to this is a tendency for preachers to say too little about Christ's life of teaching, healing, and loving care. There is a need to affirm the active obedience of Christ in his incarnate life, fulfilling the law, alongside his passive obedience in and through the cross. The cross comes as

older hymns, perhaps no longer appears appropriate and may be best avoided. Some have claimed that penal substitutionary legitimates the abuse of children, but this is a perverse distortion of what has been proclaimed down the centuries. The Son was not a child, and the role of suffering was willingly and voluntarily undertaken by the incarnate second person of the Trinity. What he suffered was not as a result of a fit of temper, but of holy and righteous justice, worked out in holy and righteous wrath. Through all, the Son remained the focus of the Father's love.

¹⁰⁰ J. Duncan, quoted in Packer, 'What did the Cross Achieve?' p 120.

the culmination of a life of servanthood and voluntary self-sacrifice, and the totality of the work of the atonement should be emphasised.

When preaching, remember to speak of both the cross and the resurrection together. Some sermons on Calvary end with a crucifix, not an empty cross. The triumph on the third day should not be separated from the passion narratives, but be seen as an essential part of the work of the atonement. The resurrection is an integral part of the gospel of a living, vindicated Saviour, who has conquered sin, and death and its rightful punishment. It is fundamental to spiritual new-birth and the believer's ongoing Spirit-filled fellowship with the risen Christ.

I would also urge preachers to remember the richness of biblical ways of speaking of the cross. The Scriptures use a range of terms such as ransom, reconciliation, participation, redemption, victory, and these must not be ignored. However, such proclamation leads to supplementary questions which need to be answered - Why was Christ victorious? How is it that we are reconciled? These require the preacher to explain Christ's substitutionary death as the propitiatory sacrifice, which lies at the heart of all other Scripture ways of speaking of the atonement.

It is also important to root the preaching of salvation in what God in Christ has done. It does not rest on a decision a person has made, or an experience they have had, it rests on the perfect and finished work of Christ, through his life, death, and resurrection, and the application of that work to us by grace. We should not proclaim the fruits of Christ's work without first preaching Christ, the root of the blessings.

I would also urge preachers to remember to show the moral and practical consequences of the atonement for the believer. The fruit of the cross is a new creation. By God's saving grace, believers become new creations, and should live as such. A person is not saved simply by being moved by the example of Christ, but once saved, the example of Christ in the cross should be the inspiration for a profoundly changed way of living. Seeing the atonement as a work of penal substitution should be the most powerful inspiration to love and worship God, and to serve him. If Christ has truly borne our sins, and the punishment due for them, the believer is free indeed, now and for eternity! How then shall we respond to such a great salvation? Is any sacrifice too great, or any work of service too hard?

5. Suggested further reading to help understand the debate:

Theological and Biblical Material

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Classic Historical Studies

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